

Adrift

by Obsidian Productions

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Summary: In the wake of peace brokered between Humanity and the Elites, a cache of Forerunner knowledge was unleashed. Among that data were locations of sites where the Flood waited in hibernation. A special branch of warriors, nicknamed the Yellowjackets, was formed to deal with these Flood threats. One such squad must now fight for survival aboard a derelict vessel overrun with Flood.

## 1. Yellowjackets

â€" \*\*Adriftâ€" \*\*\_

A Novella by Obsidian Productions

\*\*Chapter 01

><strong>\_-Yellowjackets-\_

Blake couldn't sleep again. He stared with bitter remorse at the clear little bottle of pills on his bedside table. He'd already taken two, and Cohen had told him in that quiet, studious voice of his not to take more than two every twenty four hours. They were supposed to be powerful. Blake was still toying around with the idea of taking a third, perhaps in frustration or perhaps to spite his insomnia, but finally decided against it.

When Cohen told you something about medicine, he meant it. Because he was a genius when it came to such things. That, and he was a Corporal, and Blake was just a Lance Corporal. Blake shifted his gaze from the pills to the cramped quarters he'd been given when he and Echo Squad had come onboard the ship a few days ago. The \_Valor\_, it was called. Blake tried not to think about it as he roused himself from bed and flicked on the lights.

Too-bright light flooded the room, forcing him to screw up his eyes. He rubbed at them absently as he stumbled towards the bathroom. He'd managed that awkward kind of half-sleep when a man can be lying in bed, stubbornly trying to sleep one second and, the very next, in the

blink of an eye, five hours has passed. For him, it was about four and a half. He supposed he should be satisfied with that amount.

Blake studied himself in the bathroom mirror. He didn't like what he saw. He was twenty five, but looked ten or fifteen years older. There was a grim certainty in his eyes, a haunted look that spoke of pain and terror. Blake tried to tell himself that the gaunt, hollow look his face had taken on was a result of the insomnia that had started last year. But, deep down, he knew the truth and knew that he was just lying to himself.

The truth of the matter was that Blake had run out of things to care about. First there had been friends and family, but they had all either died or drifted away. Then there was the military, the Corps, the UNSC...but after a few years, he'd lost any and all sense of patriotism, and duty and honor were thin ghosts haunting his psyche. The war had been good, the burning hatred the Covenant and then the Flood imbued him with...

But that was gone now. The war had ended almost seven months ago. The death of the Covenant and the defeat of the Flood was supposed to be a reason to rejoice. It had just left Blake colder than ever. Blake had been in the Marines for two years, joined up at eighteen, before signing on with the ODSTs because it seemed like a good idea. And now here he was, finally able to take the next step, because someone had finally created the next step.

Blake was a Yellowjacket. When the war had ended and Humanity managed to get access to a huge Forerunner database of knowledge that the Covenant had been hoarding, a wealth of information was released. One such piece of data was the location of dozens of sites that held the Flood in stasis. Knowing that a Flood outbreak was probably the one thing that really could send Humanity and the Elites over the edge and plunging headlong into genuine extinction, the pair decided to start going around and disposing of these sites safely.

The ideal situation was to crack open these sites and installations and sometimes derelict vessels, and kill the Flood while they were still in hibernation. Unfortunately...Flood outbreaks still occurred more often than the UNSC was willing to admit. So, on the down-low, ONI formed the Outbreak Containment Branch, unofficially called the Yellowjackets by the actual members of the OCB for the industrial-yellow armor they issued. These squads were made up entirely of ODST volunteers, of which there were plenty.

Blake had joined the Yellowjackets because he honestly couldn't see stopping his life of action. He literally had nothing to go back to. Blake sighed, turned and flipped on the shower. Once it was at the proper temperature, he stripped of what little clothing he had on and slipped in. After a few moments, he was clean, towed off and pulling himself into his uniform. Blake felt a little bit better, but now felt the urge for an energy drink.

Once he finished dressing, Blake stepped out, blinking owlshly in the bright lights of the corridor. He rubbed absently at his eyes as he stumbled from the dorms section into the rec room. It was occupied by a handful of members from Echo Squad. Private Barclay sat opposite of PFC Justin. They were arm-wrestling. Ryan was cheering them on and Peters sat in the back of the room, smiling into her coffee and

reading something.

Barclay was a rifleman in the squad, there for his skill with guns and his tendency to get up close and personal with the enemy...and be able to keep his cool. He was an easy-going man of thirty who smoked and drank in between the hellish missions they ran. The kid he was arm-wrestling, Justin, struck Blake as a maniac. He was young, he'd done a year and a half in the Corps and found that he wanted more. So he'd joined up with the Helljumpers and still had the gall to be enthusiastic and fresh-faced about everything.

Justin loved to laugh and executed every order with glee. He was two years younger than Blake and technically the sniper of the group, though when he couldn't stare down the sights of a scope, he was just as comfortable scouting ahead into dangerous territory. Ryan, who stood to the side, watching them with a nasty grin and his arms folded across his chest, was one of two Corporals. He was good at what he did, great, in fact, but he seemed to enjoy arguing a bit too much. He took every joke too seriously and was always ready for a fight. He'd nearly had his nose busted in a half dozen fights already by other members of Echo Squad.

PFC Peters was the auxiliary medic of the group. She was one of only two women in the squad. She was in her early forties and Blake had a difficult time understanding why she was a Yellowjacket. She was too kind for the job and had taken on the unlikely role of den mother, offering equal parts motherly love and motherly scolding to the men as necessary.

Blake looked around at them all and figured maybe it was best he was awake, everyone else seemed to be. Then again, his sleeping schedule rarely matched everyone else's and he often found himself catching sleep where and when he could find it. He hesitated in the rec room, unsure of where he might be going, then decided maybe the bridge might be most interesting.

"Hey, Blake, you want in on this?" Justin asked, his face slick with sweat.

"Hey, you gotta lose first kid," Barclay replied. Justin snorted and pressed harder, his muscles bulging. Barclay may have ten years on Justin, but he was even more solidly built.

"Not this time, old man." Barclay chuckled and Blake left them to it. He slipped through to the next corridor and kept going until he found the bridge. The Valor wasn't a very big ship, enough to comfortably house Echo Squad and the skeleton crew required to run it. Blake stepped onto the bridge and found the two most competent people in Echo Squad standing in between the pilot and the navigator.

Sergeant Whitley was a grim, battle-hardened veteran who smoked so many cigars he might as well have bought the company that made them. He was tall, well-built and a twenty year man, the last ten of them in the ODSs. He'd seen more combat than probably all of Echo put together. There was something deeply comforting and terrifying about the man. He was easily six four and had close-cropped hair that had once been black but was now losing its original color to a grim gray. Whitley didn't seem to give a damn.

Lance Corporal Starck should have been a Corporal. The only other

woman on the squad, she was compactly built with lean muscle, had the sharpest eyes Blake had ever seen and had very little time for nonsense. She held herself rigidly, even when they were off duty, and her humor was fast and hard, usually wielded to emasculate any man who thought she was easy or weak. They stood and stared at a readout, muttering quietly to each other.

Both turned as soon as Blake entered the bridge. Whitley offered a grim smile.

"Glad you're up, son. It's almost showtime. I was just about to make the announcement...why don't you head for the briefing room?" Blake nodded and about faced. Starck joined him as he left the bridge and they walked in an awkward silence towards the briefing room. Almost as soon as they reached it, Whitley's gruff voice came over the shipwide comms and informed everyone that it was time for a sit down.

Blake entered first and took his seat, as did Starck. It didn't take long for the others to filter in. Blake studied them as they did. Corporal Cohen was the primary medic, a tall, lean, quiet man who rarely spoke and when he did, it was to offer a startlingly insightful opinion. There was nothing exactly intimidating about the man, but a powerful intellect lurked quietly just beneath the surface of his blue gaze.

PFC Weir was a quiet, young technician who was, by far, the most reclusive of the group. He was awkward and asocial and obviously had a hard time talking to people. Blake thought that it spoke deeply of his bravery that he was not only an ODST but a Yellowjacket. He was young and a certified genius. Despite this, the others, particularly Ryan, had bagged on him something fierce when he'd first joined the squad. Weir reminded Blake of his younger brother, who had died almost a decade ago in a Covenant raid, and the two quickly formed a silent but strong brotherly bond. Weir ended up coming out of his shell...somewhat.

Private DJ seemed to be permanently haunted by a bad mood. He was always gloomy, always puffing away on a cigarette and always pointing out everything that could and probably would go wrong. The others were often loathe to have him around and really, the only thing that kept them tolerating him was the fact that he was their communications technician, and he was really, really good at his job.

Finally, there was Private Caldwell. Caldwell was the newest addition to the team. He'd been shipped in right before they'd gotten onboard the \_Valor\_ and despite being an ODST, the man was most certainly nervous. Blake knew he'd eventually settle in and the transition would be a lot smoother after a mission together, it always seemed to be. The man's main problem was that he didn't seem to know where he fit in the social hierarchy.

"Alright, everyone shut up!" Whitley snapped as he took a seat at the head of the table. The general din of conversation fell away, leaving the room bathed in silence. He grinned around his cigar and began.

"Listen up, because I'm not going to repeat myself. Our mission is a big old ugly bastard of a cruiser called the \_Erebus\_. We're heading

for a little, middle-o'-nowhere system called the Gates System. Only one habitable planet, and barely at that. There was a Forerunner structure there, and it had Flood in it. The \_Erebus\_ was sent to first ferry troops and personnel down to the surface, then oversee the operation and, in the event of disaster...contain the situation. Well, things were going great...and then a disaster happened.

"The Flood got out. The \_Erebus\_, which had been equipped with plasma cannons for glassing, began containment procedures. The Forerunner facility was burned to glass. Unfortunately, a handful of ships made it through the fire and flames. Out of that handful, a few managed to make it past the \_Erebus\_' defenses and get onboard...and the Flood spread through the ship like wildfire. It's our job to get onboard, rescue survivors and either save the ship or blow it to hell. Chances are we're gonna blow that bastard to hell."

A general cheer went up from the squad and Whitley grinned, allowing them the moment of primal joy, before quieting them down again.

"Now, this is all standard shit. We're gonna suit up, heading in there and do the Yellowjacket thing. Afterward, I'll take everyone out for a round of drinks, courtesy of the UNSC. Any questions?" There were none. Whitley nodded curtly. "Good. Alright, go on, you sons of bitches. Go get dressed up nice and pretty and I'll be down to give you the eye in a few minutes. We'll be in system not long from now."

And, like they'd done a few dozen times before, the squad stood and filed out of the debriefing room and made for the armory. Blake began to feel a little better. He managed to snag an energy drink from the messhall and down it before stepping into the armory. This is what he lived for now. The thrill of battle, the adrenaline, the sense of fellowship. He popped open his locker and began to pull himself into that distinctive industrial-yellow armor. He'd chosen to go with the EOD helmet, as they'd all been allowed to choose.

Something about its style and design appealed to him. He watched the others go about pulling on their own armor. The armory was alive with jokes and voices. Blake smiled quietly and listened to them, happy that they were happy. He tried not to think about the insomnia and the crushing depression that found him between missions. That was for later, not now. He fitted his helmet into place, then went over to the weapons racks.

He selected an M6G for his hip holster, then a battle rifle, as he found it the most effective weapon against the Flood, then filled up his pockets with spare clips of ammo and a handful of fragmentation grenades. The others did so as well, selecting their own lethal arsenal. As Blake waited for them to finish, he could feel the telltale signs of a ship coming out of slipspace and back into real space.

They had arrived.

## 2. Casualties

\*\*Chapter 02\*\*\*  
><strong>\_-Casualties-\_  
</strong>

The first thing Blake noticed as he walked into the small hangar that the \_Valor\_ came equipped with was the man in black unmarked armor sitting on a crate and smoking a cigarette. He had his helmet off, set on the floor beneath one foot. He was very pale. His face had a gaunt, almost haunted look to it and his eyes might as well have been chips of blue ice. A curious scar ran down the side of his face, from just below one eye to his chin. He kept his black hair short, cropped close to the skull, and dark stubble stained his jawline.

He pulled on the long white cig and blew a perfect ring of blue smoke. When he noticed Blake and the others, he stood and offered them an awkward smile as they approached. Sergeant Whitley pushed ahead of the others and came to stand next to the mysterious man. Blake took an immediate suspicion to him, there was something...strange about him.

"Men, this is Specialist Trent Temple. He's from ONI. He's here to offer us help," Whitley explained gruffly.

"Why is ONI in on this?" Ryan asked suspiciously. The others remained silent, content to let Ryan handle the situation.

"Officially, they aren't," Trent replied. "I'm here on my own behalf. I wanted to do this." Ryan bristled at the casual response.

"So what, you got tired of sitting up in your ONI office and decided to come play soldier? I'm not paid to babysit." Dead silence enveloped the hangar. Trent glanced over at Whitley, who raised his eyebrows in a kind of 'be-my-guest' gesture. Trent smiled unpleasantly and Blake was suddenly instilled with the notion that this was a very, very deadly man.

"I've fought on Earth, before and after the War. I also fought on the Ark and killed three Minor Prophets there. I've engaged the Covenant and the Flood more times than I care to count. I used to be an ODST. And I've faced down things that would make you piss in your pants." He took a long pull on the cigarette and blew another smoke ring, then he looked Ryan in the eye. "And if you ever talk to me like that again, you little shit, I'll put my cigarette out on your forehead."

More silence. Ryan looked as though he'd been slapped. He glanced once, briefly, to Whitley, who gave him a look that said 'you've made your bed, now sleep in it.' Whitley was very good at conveying messages with his eyes alone. Ryan's hands clenched into fists at his side. He began to move and Trent spoke up once more.

"Don't test me, Corporal. I'd really hate to start this op with a man short. I've seen your record, you're a great fighter. I'm a better one. I'm not here to steal anyone's thunder, I just needed something to do."

"Corporal, give it up. That's an order," Whitley growled a second later. Ryan stood silently fuming but held his peace. Trent nodded, knelt and grabbed his helmet. He secured it, becoming faceless behind the opaque visor. Blake was satisfied by the display. He'd never got along very well with Ryan, especially after Ryan had taken to bullying Weir so often that he and Blake had nearly come to blows over it.

The men began to make their way over to the Pelican, which would ferry them across to the \_Erebus\_. As they trudged up the ramp, dwelling in the calm before the storm, the pilot began speaking with Whitley over the radio. He had nothing interesting to say, save that they couldn't pick up any communications, it was confirmed that the ship was in a slowly decaying orbit and that LifeScan was still running, with odd results so far. Whitley decided it was close enough, closed the hatch and settled into the Pelican's cockpit.

Blake sat back and tried to relax, but found that he couldn't. There was something wrong, something that was sapping his pre-mission adrenaline and converting it into fear and ominous foreboding. He strapped in and waited, trying not to fidget or fiddle with anything. Around them, uncomfortable conversation started and stopped abruptly, and he could tell that it wasn't just him that was rattled by this job.

But what was so different about this one compared to any of the others? Perhaps it was the presence of Trent Temple, the mysterious ONI Specialist. What had he said? He was just looking for something to do? What did he do \_regularly\_ if this is what he did when he was bored? Blake wasn't sure he wanted to know the answer.

"Have a look, boys and girls! Patch into exterior camera three," Whitley called back to them. Blake worked his HUD and wirelessly patched into the Pelican's limited camera network. His vision was filled with the stars and the slowly growing \_Erebus\_. It was a huge vessel, a long, dark monolith set against the dead gray planet it was slowly falling towards. There were few lights on the exterior of the vessel, and the windows were mostly dark. It looked like a derelict plague ship, and Blake supposed that's basically what it was.

Suddenly, there was a bright flash. Everyone let out a cry of surprise as the Pelican rumbled gently. Blake and the others began to question what was going on when Whitley suddenly barked for everyone to shut up. He began frantically calling out to the \_Valor\_, and a tone of dismay and despair began to creep into his voice that Blake found terrifying. He was still patched into the exterior camera when, abruptly, Whitley shouted, "Hold on!" and yanked the controls. The Pelican lurched sickeningly to one side right as another bright flash sprung into existence.

"What's happening?" Trent demanded.

"Someone on that goddamn ship just put a MAC round through the \_Valor\_!" Whitley cried. A dismayed silence fell.

"It's gone then?" Trent asked.

"Yes, it's gone and I'm bringing us in as quickly as I can. They're targeting us." The Pelican lurched crazily to one side again and Blake held on for dear life.

"Why are they shooting at us?!" Barclay snarled.

"Maybe it's automatic!" Weir suggested. The Pelican shifted once more and Whitley yelled for everyone to shut up. Blake waited impatiently,

hoping that he wouldn't die and finding, strangely, that he suddenly cared whether or not he lived. Being gutted by a Flood was one thing, but dying in a Pelican crash? That was just stupid.

Time seemed to stretch into eternity and suddenly, finally, they were there. Whitley edged the Pelican into the hangar of the Erebus and settled it down onto the pitted metal ground. There was a moment of terrible silence as the engines shut down and Blake found himself waiting for some new sound to fill the void. There was none. Finally, the sound of Whitley unbuckling himself rang out and he stood and came back into the cabin.

"Gear up, everyone," he said, his voice heavy and leaden. "We're trapped on this tub until we can radio for help. I didn't see any of the bastards out there when I landed but...stay sharp."

Blake unbuckled and stood up, gripping his battle rifle tightly. He hoped whatever he'd brought with him would be enough. Once everyone was standing and armed, Whitley hit the button and the ramp began to lower. Almost as soon as they were able, the Yellowjackets began to pound down the ramp, intent on securing the area.

Blake was third out and scouted the immediate area as he moved into position. They had come into a large hangar, mostly taken up by piles of crates, Pelicans, Longswords and Warthogs. Everything had the feel of abrupt abandonment to it and the signs of combat were everywhere. There were bullet holes in everything, blood splashed in thick sprays all across the floor, spent shell casings littering the deckplates, and just a few bodies were mixed in.

"Alright," Whitley began. "Spread out, secure this hangar-"

He was cut off by a loud shriek that seemed to be a signal. Abruptly, Flood Combat Forms began pouring from every conceivable direction. They ran from behind crates, leaped from over Pelicans and dropped from ventilation grates in the ceiling. Suddenly, there was no time for words and only time for action. Blake found himself automatically targeting the nearest charging Combat Form, what had once been a man and was now antithetical to mankind.

He squeezed the trigger and the battle rifle spoke, a three-round burst neatly punching a hole through the decayed chest of the Flood beast and sending in sprawling to the ground in a spray of mottled flesh and coagulated blood. All around him he could hear the frenzied sounds of combat as rifles and shotguns roared. Blake felt panic welling up in him as he shifted his sights to another Flood, fired, then shifted again.

But that panic was crushed almost immediately by years of training backed up by a confidence that Blake knew this was something he could do, and do well. He'd never been very good at anything in his life...except for shooting a gun and staying alive in combat situations. He heard the others shouting and mostly filtered it out, as at this point it was just the battle cries of combat. Orders or cries for help would get past his filters, but he needed to focus.

Blake emptied his magazine and barely had time to reload before more Flood pushed in on him. There were two dozen of them at least, no, three dozen...more, maybe. How many? How had it all gone so bad so



fast? Blake kept going, letting his arms and his hands react without the need for his brain. It was what had kept him alive all these years, fighting aliens and mutant monsters. All around him were the cries of the battle-stricken and he soon lost track of his friends in the sea of green flesh and sneering, inhuman faces.

There were explosions and bullets everywhere. Blake quickly began to find himself surrounded and decided it might be high time to get to a better position. Having a wall to put his back against would be a good start. He dropped a pair of grenades into the midst of the Flood, turned and retreated as quickly as he could towards the Pelican. A hail of blood, flesh and metal fragments rained against his yellow armor, which was quickly becoming red. He took the time to reload, spun and raised his battle rifle once more, only to find that the seemingly ceaseless tide of Flood seemed to have finally broke. He began mopping up the survivors.

It wasn't long before the last Flood fell and he was reloading, turning and staring out across the sea of corpses they'd made. He spied his team, forced apart and spread out across the hangar, covered in blood and bits of flesh. Trent apparently could hold his own. He was still alive and stood out like a sore thumb in his black armor. Blake began to move back towards the Pelican, as did the others, and something seemed off to him.

He began to do a headcount and came up two short. Fear speared his heart and an icy terror flooded his guts. Who had died? It was rare for a Yellowjacket to go down on a mission, and basically unheard of for two to go down right away. Then again, missions usually weren't this bad right off the bat...

"Oh no," he heard someone say.

They had gathered around a yellow corpse. He hurried over, secretly fearing that it was Weir. Blake hated to admit it, and would hardly do so to himself, let alone anyone else, but Weir's death was probably the one thing he couldn't handle. It was the one thought that he turned away from, unable to comprehend. He felt a guilty touch of relief flood through his system as he looked through the shattered visor and found the ruined face of Barclay. He was dead, and there was nothing any of them could do about.

"Who else is missing?" Trent asked in a clipped tone.

The men sounded off and with a growing horror they realized that it was Sergeant Whitley who hadn't reported in. It didn't take long to find him. He had fallen beside another Pelican, locked in combat, even unto death, with a Combat Form. Only...it wasn't a Combat Form that Blake had ever seen before. It was thin and lithe, made of tight muscles. It looked almost streamlined compared to the bulky Combat Forms the infection regularly produced. And, strangest of all, was the pole of bone that sprouted from its right arm. It was currently embedded in Whitley's chest.

"What the hell is that?" Cohen muttered quietly, nudging the corpse with his boot. Neither the Flood form nor Whitley stirred. They were both dead.

"It's new," Trent said flatly. He began reloading his weapon, a battle rifle, and nodded to Whitley's corpse. "You'd better field

strip him, he won't be needing it anymore." He turned and began walking slowly back into the hangar. Blake felt almost completely at a loss. The mission was already screwed over by the fact that they no longer had a ride home, and he'd honestly expected Whitley to figure it out and dole out the orders.

"Alright!" Trent called, startling him and the others. "We need to get the bridge and figure out how bad the situation really is. We'll need to get a LifeScan going and see if communications are up to snuff. There should be another ship patrolling in the next system over and if we can get in touch with them, they should be here inside of twelve hours. Of course, we'll need to disable that MAC gun first and see if it was automated or someone was firing it..."

"How do you know there's a ship in the next system?" Blake asked.

"Well, I checked, obviously."

"You checked? Did you expect something like this to happen?" Trent snorted.

"Are you kidding? I always expect shit like this. So everyone gather up whatever ammo you can, I imagine we'll be in for some hard fighting and-" Ryan stepped forward suddenly.

"Hold on, who put you in charge?!" he snapped. "Me and Cohen are the Corporals here!" Trent's opaque visor slowly turned to face Ryan.

"Corporal Ryan, technically, I outrank even Sergeant Whitley. I outrank everyone here by a long shot. And I respect all of your combat abilities, in fact, I'll be counting on them, and while I had no intention of stealing Whitley's thunder, he's dead now and frankly, I don't trust you, Ryan, to lead Echo Squad to survival, let alone victory. Would you feel up to taking the job, Cohen?" Trent asked, turning to the other Corporal. Cohen shook his head.

"No, not really. I'm a lot better at following orders than giving them," he replied evenly.

"Most men are, and there's nothing wrong with that. But you're too emotionally imbalanced Ryan, so you can either hang out on the Pelican or fall in line with the others." Silence again. Ryan was fuming. He turned to look at the others for some kind of support, but only found the wordless, stern gazes offered by helmets of steel and glass. Finally, his shoulders slumping slightly in defeat, he turned back to Trent and offered a mock salute.

"Yes, sir," he snarled. Trent nodded, satisfied.

"Good, now, I trust you've all reviewed the layout of the ship on the way here. I've dealt with situations like this before. The bridge isn't far from here, we managed to get lucky and land in the hangar closest to it. If we hoof it, we can be there in five minutes and then I'll have a much better idea of what's going on."

The others split up and spread out, scouring the corpses for more ammunition. They divided up the cache of supplies from Whitley and Barclay. Blake accepted a pair of magazines for his battle rifle

gratefully, as he was running low, and managed to find another two amidst the field of corpses. After several quiet moments, they all gathered at the far end of the hangar, ready for anything. Blake found himself feeling a bit better now that Trent had taken charge. Much like Cohen, he wasn't much for giving orders.

Trent opened the door and everyone tensed for a sudden inrush of Flood. But there was nothing, just a lonely stretch of corridor that spread out away from them in either direction. Trent led the way and the others moved in a long line behind him, a string of yellow beings following an obsidian one. As they crept down the tall, lengthy, flickering passageway, Blake kept expecting more terrors cast in rotting flesh to leap from the shadows.

Sounds assaulted them occasionally as they hurried on. Haunting moans, heavy things dropping against the floor, piercing shrieks, and, below it all, a soft, regular sound that was disturbingly close to respiration. Blake tried to ignore these ominous noises, instead straining his ears to hear the signals of encroaching combat. And there seemed to be something there, something beneath the ambient noises of the ship...

Blake was still listening when they finally arrived at the bridge. His combat senses were whispering sternly to him. They came to the large double doors that granted access to the bridge and Weir moved forward to work on the console once Trent tried it and found it broken. More moments passed in terse silence, broken only by the soft sounds of Weir working and the scuff of armor on the deckplates as the Yellowjackets shifted uncomfortably.

Finally, with a soft pop, the control panel lit up and the doors slid open. Blake glanced back over his shoulder and froze.

The bridge was filled with more Flood, seemingly waiting for them. All of the Combat Forms turned to face them. The Yellowjackets turned around and stared at the massive collection of what might as well have been the living dead.

And then the battle began again.

### 3. The Game Plan

**\*\*Chapter 03\*\*\*\_**  
**><em>\*\*\_-The Game Plan-\_**

Blake let out a long, slow breath as the last Combat Form fell. There was a hush of quietude as everyone collectively waited for any more Flood to make their position known. Then, as the lull swelled and everyone realized that the battle really was over, the sound of empty magazines clattering to the floor and reloading filled the bridge. Blake was already sweating inside his industrial-yellow armor and he upped the internal air-conditioning another notch after he reloading his battle rifle and began to walk along the length of the bridge.

It was a large room, built in a new style that was emerging in the more recently built ships. This bridge was huge, with high, vaulted ceilings and most of the front wall dedicated to thick, unbreakable glass. The interior walls were ringed with consoles and terminals

where technicians in orange or blue jumpsuits would usually sit, manning their various stations. In the center of it all was a raised dais on which the Captain would sit. It sported a comfortable, high-tech chair and a holographic display platform.

Currently, the display was inert, as were most of the terminals. While the Yellowjackets secured the area, making double sure that none of the Flood were playing dead and no more were lurking in the deep nest of shadows that seemed to plague the exterior of the dim room, Trent marched up to the nearest working terminal and took a seat. Time began to pass in bleak fragments and Blake found himself thinking of Whitley and Barclay.

He'd known neither man very well. He knew and liked Whitley in a vague kind of way. Whitley was loud and gruff, but honestly no one really knew much about their Sergeant. They had all kind of orbited around him socially, kept at a safe distance with a buffer of gruff demeanor, cigar smoke and grim smiles. Blake had sometimes found himself wondering about Whitley's past or what the man was really thinking.

Now he'd never know.

Barclay was somewhat similar to Whitley, though Blake felt he had less to hide and was genuinely just a guy who liked to smoke, drink and make nasty jokes. He was fun to be around and Blake often got drunk with him, swapping war and women stories. It was one of the few things he felt he had left to make him happy, and now even that was gone. Blake sighed bitterly and then made himself pay attention as Trent called them over.

He was hunched over a screen that bathed his helmet and armor in a flickering red and green light. It was displaying a holographic outline of the ship. Several sections of the ship were flickering in an unpleasant, threatening crimson.

"As you can see, the Erebus is in bad shape. The main reactor is down and the auxiliary is getting ready to go. Engines are dead, which is causing our orbital decay. LifeScan is offline. Communications are offline...I'd swear someone did this on purpose..." Trent trailed off for a second and the Yellowjackets shifted uncomfortably. It was bad enough that there were Flood onboard, and possibly even a new Combat Form at that, but the idea that there might be a person onboard, working against them...

"Alright everyone, listen up." Trent stood, turned and looked out over the small sea of blank, helmeted faces and yellow armor. "Ryan, Blake and Peters are coming with me to the engines. Blake, you're going to fix them since they have the shortest fuse and we really need to not fall into the planet's atmosphere. Cohen, you are going to take Weir and Caldwell to the primary reactor bay and reactivate it. Starck, take DJ and Justin and get LifeScan back in working order. Any questions?" There were none.

"Alright, let's head out! Everyone keep your radios on and stay in contact."

There were a string of replies and Echo Squad exited the bridge and split up, each group going their separate ways. Blake found himself

walking alongside Peters and again found her such a mystery. She reminded him of his mother, but then, everyone in Echo Squad said that. Well, everyone younger than thirty five. There was something almost fragile about her, something kind and yet...something broken. Most surprising of all, probably, was her ability to fight.

Blake always felt awkward when she was in the room and often found himself refraining from saying much of anything for fear of offending her. She'd put him and the others at ease a few weeks in by making some pretty lewd jokes and getting drunk with them every now and again. Blake had once asked her why she was in the Yellowjackets, or even the ODSs. She'd told him, very bleakly, that she had nothing else to do.

Much like Whitley had been, she was a guarded mystery. But he trusted her with his life, they all did. She'd sewn up enough of them while under attack from the Flood enough times that they had to trust her as such. Blake realized his mind was drifting and snapped back into sharp focus, but there was only a lonely stretch of bloody, flickering corridor for him to inspect. The Flood were there, somewhere...but they were well-hidden for now.

"So, Trent...who are you, really?" he asked suddenly. He was surprised by the question, as he hadn't meant to ask it so directly. But sometimes, questions demanded to be asked nakedly.

"I'm an ONI Specialist, really," Trent replied.

"But what does a Specialist actually do? I'm not even sure I've heard that rank before..."

"It's a real rank. Let's just say I deal with unique threats."

"So do we. How come you aren't a Yellowjacket? You seemed adept at it."

"The Yellowjackets weren't around when I became a Specialist. And, honestly, being a Specialist is a lot more interesting and deadly than being a Yellowjacket." Blake raised an eyebrow in surprise. Short of becoming a Spartan, which was seriously beginning to consider when he'd started hearing rumors of the Spartan-IV Program, which was taking apparently volunteers, he assumed that the Yellowjackets was the deadliest job available.

"Could I become a Specialist? What are the requirements?" he asked.

"You could," Trent replied after a pause. "Maybe. It takes a...special kind of person to become a Specialist."

"Yeah, a special kind of asshole," Ryan muttered. Trent began to say something, but they turned a corner and found themselves staring in through an open, huge doorway that led into the main engine room. A small army of Flood awaited them. Combat Forms and Carrier Forms and waves of tiny Infection Forms waited for them, seething ominously with an inhuman and infinite, alien rage. The four of them stood shoulder to shoulder in the broad corridor, weapons at ready, and plunged headlong once more into the dark thrill of battle.

They opened fire almost at once as the Flood charged. Blake focused

on the little ones first, popping them by the dozens as they seethed viciously amidst the forest of decayed legs bloated with impossible muscle. He instantly shifted his barrel and sights up, punching neat holes through the chests of the Combat Forms that rushed at him. A mindless, horrible yammering rose above the din of battle as Blake spied more of the new ones. They all shrieked and jibbered terribly as they rushed blindly forward.

Blake was disturbed by this new development. He'd hoped they were some kind of offshoot, some bizarre mutation, but they were becoming unfortunately regular. They aimed their bony, pole-arms at the Yellowjackets like jousters of ancient, medieval Earth. Blake brought them down very quickly, as they seemed to be able to move with a greater speed and more lithe dexterity. Coagulated blood and rotten flesh flew on the air.

It didn't take long for Blake to get worried. There were more Flood than ever, they seemed to have been congregating, waiting even, in the Engine Room for them. The Carriers popped, spewing Combat Forms and Infection Forms everywhere. Blake began to feel them attaching to his armor and he fought viciously to tear them off, momentarily distracted. Each time he would grab one it would pop in his grasp in a spray of grotesque, squishy flesh.

Amidst all this chaos, something smashed into him and he cried out as he was sent sprawling to the ground. He caught a blur of movement and then his helmet was suddenly covered in blood. Fresh blood. He heard part of a piercing scream that froze his blood in his veins and seemed to quiet the battle around him.

He saw her fall. Saw Peters falling to the ground with a dark black hole punched neatly through her visor. One of the new ones, what Blake found himself thinking of as a Lancer, stood there with blood and bits of brain on its pole-arm. It turned to face him, slowly it seemed, and began to rear back that pole of polished bone. Red gore dripped from it. Suddenly, Trent put his pistol to its back and squeezed the trigger three times.

A trio of bloody, fist-sized explosions erupted like alien volcanoes across the beast's chest and it collapsed roughly to the ground. Blake found himself grounded back to reality a little, rolled to his side and began firing from his prone position on the ground. He emptied his clip, taking out another half dozen Combat Forms and finally it was still and silent once more.

"Oh, Peters..." he moaned after he had climbed to his feet and stared down at her ruined and broken body. Ryan stood by silently, keeping an eye out for more Flood. Trent was already kneeling at her side, relieving her of her ammo.

"How do you do it?" Blake found himself asking. "How are you so...calm about it?" Trent looked up at him suddenly.

"I broke," he said calmly. "I broke, survived and rebuilt. But it's not easy. It's still not easy." He finished field-stripping the corpse. Blake realized that that's all it was now, all that it had to be for now, if he were to remain sane and not end up the same way. He looked away and marched into the Engine Room. It was a vast room, storing titanic amounts of equipment and the engines themselves. It seemed to stretch away from the in the darkness. Blake

spied the glow of an active terminal not far away and marched purposefully up to it.

He tuned out of the heartbreaking conversation Trent was currently having with the others, reporting grimly that Peters had fallen so suddenly in combat and to really keep an eye out for the new ones.

"Lancers," Blake said suddenly, unable to fully tune out. Trent and Ryan glanced at him curiously as he continued working without looking up.

"What's that?" Trent asked.

"I think we should call the new one Lancers," he replied softly.

"That's a good name, kid. We'll stick with it," Trent said.

Blake didn't respond, instead focusing on trying to determine what was ailing the engines. He lost himself in the work as he checked out all the major systems. One big problem was a lack of power, which should have been fixed shortly by Weir in the reactor. But even when it had power, there were still a number of minor problems that plagued the engines. Blake thought for a few moments and realized that he could just make a few minor reroutes and bypasses, and it would be enough of a quick fix to get them above and beyond the reach of the planet's gravity well.

He looked around and spied a hatchway not too far away. That was where he would have to make the bypasses.

"Cover me," he said as he walked over it.

"How long?" Trent replied, accompanying him. Ryan was deeper in the room, presumably scouting or scavenging for ammo. Or maybe just looking for some alone time. Blake didn't care. He pulled open the hatch.

"Maybe five minutes," he said. "Gotta make some bypasses if we're gonna do this."

"Alright, I'll be here."

Blake stared into a squalid maintenance tunnel that awaited him. A curious mist clung to it, a coolant leak he realized, and everything was bathed in an eerie green glow. He tried to shrug away the fear as he climbed into it. The maintenance tunnels were very narrow, a complex network of intricate lattices that crossed each other several dozen times. Luckily, he knew enough to know how to navigate them without too much trouble.

He crawled on his hands and knees through the green mist, his suit just bulky enough to make the experience really claustrophobic. He found the first bypass in about a minute and a half and immediately got to work on it. It didn't take long, but when he closed the panel and put away his tools, he heard a soft hiss that was entirely too organic and nearby for comfort. He swallowed nervously and began hurrying.

\_"How's it going in there?"\_Trent asked over the radio.

"Uh...good. Good. Yeah, I'm about halfway done," Blake managed. He hurried on, certain now that there was something in here with him. Visions of some kind of twisted, mechanical worm filled his head, like some childhood nightmare, and he tried to relax. He passed an intersection and thought he saw something shift several intersections down. Blake kept going. Somehow, he managed to reach the second location and make the bypass.

Now all he had to do was leave. Easier said than done. Blake squirmed and hurried through the green-lit tunnels, wishing that the bastards that built these ships would stop using these tunnels. But he knew how useful they were and that there really was no other more convenient way to get around something as vast as a starship engine interior without such tunnels. But at \_least\_ they could use a better light, blue maybe, or yellow, or why not regular white? At least it wasn't red. Blake began to feel a little better as he entered the home stretch.

As he crawled down the last length of corridor, spying Trent's opaque visor peering in at him from a distance, he began to feel as though something was chasing him now. He almost felt positive. As he came within the last five meters, Trent suddenly called for him to hurry up and get out of there. Fear shot through him and he moved faster than he thought possible. Trent pulled away for a second, allowing him to spill out onto the ground, then moved back into position, shoved his battle rifle into the hatch and fired twice.

Something shrieked in pain and then was silent. Trent slammed the hatch shut, then turned and offered Blake a helping hand. He pulled him roughly to his feet.

"I really hope you didn't break anything in there," Blake said.  
"Because I'm not going back in." Trent chuckled.

"So, it's done?" he asked. Blake nodded.

"Yes. Once the power comes back on, we won't have to worry about the engines again." Trent nodded and called out to the other two teams. Cohen's team was good. They had arrived at the main reactor bay and Weir was currently making some major repairs to it. Starck's team, however, wasn't doing so hot.

Mainly because nobody on Starck's team answered.

#### 4. Environmental Instability

**\*\*Chapter 04\*\*\*\_**  
**><em>\*\*\_-Environmental Instability-\_**

Blake was worried, but kept it to himself as he sighted another rotting chest and squeezed the trigger. The three-round burst shot right through and took a decent chunk of bone and muscle with it, throwing what had once been a man to the bloody deckplates. He had kind of a thing for Starck, but he'd never tell her that. At worst, she'd try to use it against him in some way, at best she'd just turn him down.



Blake always knew that Starck was her own woman and prided herself on her competence and independence. He thought that she might be harboring a secret grudge against him and most of Echo Squad on the sheer basis of their gender. For which he honestly couldn't blame her. Blake had seen enough to know that misogyny was something that Humanity would probably never outgrow. It always disappointed him and it was why he couldn't blame her for being guarded and tough even when she didn't have to be.

But probably the main reason he'd never made a move on her was that he honestly didn't think he had anything to offer her. Blake hastily reloaded and fired once more, then again and a third time, hardly allowing himself time to aim. There seemed to be so many of the ugly bastards, and what's worse was that there seemed to be more and more of the Lancers mixed in with the regular lot. He'd nearly been run through twice now.

Trent and Ryan were silent and grim beside him as they fought their way down the corridor. Time was pressing in around them as they kept trying to reach Starck's team, but there was no response, just a faint crackle of static every now and then. Blake knew that he'd have to find more ammo soon or be reduced to his pistol. But there was no time to stop and field-strip the corpses. Even with all the extra ammo he'd brought with him and what he'd salvaged so far, he was down to two clips beyond the one currently in his rifle.

Yellowjackets were, by nature, supposed to deal with Flood outbreaks. Blake was beginning to think there should have been more than one team for such an outbreak as this. Two, at least, possibly three. Had they sent only one because of Trent? Were they that confident in this Specialist? It seemed irresponsible. Blake suppressed a sigh of frustration as he reloaded with his second to last clip and brought the rifle up once more.

He was relieved to see that there was a break in the seemingly endless onslaught of Flood and helped Trent and Ryan put down the stragglers. Once they were safely on the ground, the trio picked up the pace, running the rest of the way. Trent led the way. They broke left and came to the entrance of the LifeScan bay. Blake was equal parts eager and hesitant to get into the room. He was hopeful to see that they were alright and terrified to see that they might all be dead. They came into the room and Blake was flooded with relief.

Despite signs of conflict and some corpses on the ground, Starck, DJ and Justin were fine. DJ was crouched in front of an open wall panel, working on the exposed, circuit guts of the ship like a technical surgeon. Starck and Justin were at separate parts of the room, presumably checking for signs of living Flood. They all looked over as the others came in.

"Why didn't you answer your radio?" Trent asked. Starck looked confused, then almost openly hostile, then finally seemed to get herself under control.

"I haven't heard a thing from you," she replied.

"And you didn't think that was strange?"

"Of course I did, but I figured you were busy."

"It might be the equipment," DJ said without looking over at them.  
"It could be interfering with the comms." Trent sighed.

"It's always something," he grumbled.

Just to be sure, he made his way back into the corridor and tried to contact those in the LifeScan bay. Blake heard nothing. Trent marched back in, pissed off but trying to keep a calm face on. He told them about Peters' death, to which Starck accepted with grim professionalism, DJ hardly said anything and Justin was openly shocked about. Blake tried not to listen, instead salvaging ammo from the corpses strewn across the room. He kept his thoughts focused as he knelt and began checking the pockets of a former technician.

Blake glanced up as he heard a noise above him. He stared up in abject terror as a Lancer which had been hiding in a broken open ventilation grate took the opportunity to jump down, its bony pole-arm pointed directly downwards. He let out a small sound, already moving, but he knew he wouldn't be fast enough. Abruptly, there was a shout and something slammed into him from the side. He was thrust aside and there was the solid sound of the pole-arm slamming into something, followed by a pained shout.

A series of gunshots sounded, followed by an inhuman shriek of pain. The world was a confused mess as Blake rolled to a stop and scrambled hastily to his feet. He saw a yellow-armored figure lying slumped on the floor, moaning in despondent pain. Trent and Starck were crouched over the figure. Blake recognized it as Justin.

"Will he live?" Blake asked quietly, approaching. Justin had saved his life, and might have ended his own in the process. But Blake's spirits lightened considerably as he saw no blood gushing from anywhere.

"Yeah, pretty sure he'll live. Though I think he dislocated his shoulder," Trent murmured. "Here, hold this." He passed his gun to Blake, who slung his own and grabbed it.

"What-" Justin began, then screamed as Trent somehow managed to snap the shoulder back into place, armor and all.

"There, right as rain," Trent muttered, accepting his gun back. "But he's probably going to be out of commission." He glanced up and caught Starck's eyes with his own. "Can you hold down the fort here with Ryan and DJ?" Starck nodded.

"Yes. We can handle it."

"Excellent. DJ, what kind of timeline are we looking at?" Trent asked as he carefully began to help Justin to his feet.

"Not sure, at least twenty minutes. Someone did a real number on this bastard," DJ replied glumly, still staring long into the panel, his hands working continuously. Trent finished helping Justin up, who was weak with pain.

"Alright. I need to get him to the nearest infirmary and run a scan on him. Make sure nothing else was broken."

"I think my ribs might be," Justin groaned, hunched forward, his breath coming in short, ragged gasps. Trent nodded.

"Thought so. Blake, you're with me. Starck, step out into the corridor and call me once LifeScan is finished."

Starck responded with a sharp affirmative and Blake and Justin followed Trent back out into the main corridor. They traveled in silence amidst the sea of corpses, the most prominent sound being Justin's labored breathing. Blake felt his worry grow as he feared Justin might have punctured a lung. Then he might actually die.

He tried not to think about it, instead focusing on keeping a sharp eye out for any more Flood attacks. They managed to get to the infirmary without encountering a single Flood form or uttering a single word. Blake hung out with Justin in the corridor while Trent cleared the infirmary. Once he was positive it was empty, he called them in. Blake studied the medical bay as Trent helped Justin over to one of the examination tables.

It was mostly clean, almost entirely untouched by the conflict. There was something inherently comforting about the bright lights and clean walls. Everything was in good order, the cabinet drawers closed, the counters clear, the examination tables unoccupied. Justin looked terrible, and Trent decided to take a calculated risk.

"I'm gonna give you some morphine, alright kid?" he asked, extracting a syringe from a large medical kit on the wall. He held it up, flicked it a few times, then squirted a little bit out of the top. "That okay?"

"Yeah, alright. But not too much," Justin replied, wincing in pain. Trent nodded and injected him with a quarter of the hypo.

"Don't worry kid, I know everything there is to know about morphine," Trent replied. He set the hypo aside and then fired up the scanning equipment. "Now lay there and take a break, Justin. You've earned it."

"Alright," Justin murmured, the drugs already obvious in his voice. Trent left Justin to it and walked over to where Blake was standing. Trent leaned up against a counter while Blake hopped up on an examination table. Trent pulled out a pack of cigarettes, they said Yeheyuan on the side in blue stylized text. He pulled one out, then offered the pack to Blake.

"Want one?" he asked.

Blake hesitated, he had taken up smoking a few years ago, then given it up last year...but there didn't seem much point in not doing it now. He finally shrugged, took off his helmet and took one. Trent lit up both of their cigs with a zippo lighter featuring the flaming skull of the Helljumpers. Blake felt like now might be a good time to talk with the strange entry to Echo Squad, but he wasn't exactly sure how to start.

"You seem like a survivor, Trent," he said finally. A look of strange fear passed over Trent's face then, but it almost immediately passed and he grinned grimly.

"Yeah, I guess so. I've been through a lot of shit," he replied.

"Does it ever bother you? You know...how you're still alive and a lot of other people aren't? I think there's a name for it..."

"Survivor's guilt," Trent replied morosely, his dark humor now gone. He sighed quietly. "Yeah, it bugs me. A lot. It used to bother me a lot more. I...my entire squad was wiped out on New Jerusalem. I was the only survivor. I didn't take it too well but I got over it. Eventually. For the most part." Trent took a large pull on his cig and fell silent.

"Any advice?"

"Well...hell, I dunno. I'm pretty bad at being social, I think. I guess the only way to go on...is to just go on, you know? Just keep going. Because what else is there to do?"

"Die, I guess."

"Yeah, pretty much...you thinking about dying, Blake?" Blake was quiet for a long moment, really considering the question. Finally, he shrugged.

"Maybe. I mean, I've thought about it...still do, sometimes. I just feel like, I don't know...like what's the point? There's always going to be more Flood to fight, or more bad guys to fight. There's always going to be more suffering. What difference does it make what I do?" Trent was quiet for a long moment, simply smoking and contemplating. Finally, he began to nod slowly.

"The trick, I believe, is to not think of that. I guess the point is to reduce as much suffering as you can, and try to enjoy yourself along the way. Personally, I've never really bought into religion. I've just...seen too much suffering in the galaxy for there to logically be any kind of benevolent entity that watches over everything. The meaning of life, I think, is to give meaning to your life. And to be happy, I guess." Trent laughed suddenly.

"But don't put too much stock into what I'm saying. I'm just some guy who knows how to shoot a gun and stay alive."

"There don't seem to be too many of those, just lately. A lot of us have that first part down, but it's that second part that's apparently so tough," Blake murmured.

"Yeah. It is." There was a soft chime and Trent stuck the cig in his mouth and crossed the infirmary quickly. Justin was practically out of it, and the examination table had finished scanning him. Blake replaced his helmet and joined Trent while he studied the scan. He was frowning.

"What's the diagnosis?" Justin mumbled.

"Not good. You've broken two ribs. Luckily, you haven't punctured any lungs..." Trent suddenly turned and began rooting around in the medical kit on the wall.

"So what are we going to do? He can't exactly fight like this," Blake said. Justin stirred.

"Sure I can!" he said, though his voice came out slurred. Trent laughed and brought out two small bottles, one of almost clear liquid, the other of a curious amber-colored liquid. He extracted an empty syringe and took some from one of the bottles, then some from another. He shook it up, flicked it to get all the air bubbles to the top, then squirted the air and a bit of the liquid out.

"What's that?" Justin asked.

"A good blend of painkillers and stimulant. I'm going to give you an important job, kid. I want you to guard the bridge. We can't let it fall into enemy hands," he said. As Trent finished up, their radios crackled to life. Justin began to protest but Trent hushed him.

"Cohen here, Temple. We've brought the reactor bay back online and we're ready for our next assignment." Blake felt a bit of relief and hope begin to buoy him.

"Alright, excellent. I want your team to report back to the bridge. We're going to regroup and reevaluate the situation. Starck's team should-

"Starck here, Temple. LifeScan is back online."

"Excellent! Starck, get your team back to the bridge. I'll meet you there." There were a pair of affirmative replies and Trent began to help Justin to his feet.

## 5. Hostile Territory

**\*\*Chapter 05\*\*\***  
**><em>\*\*\_-Hostile Territory-\_-**

The bridge seemed darker when Blake stepped back onto it. The sea of shadows that ebbed gently around the edges of the broad room had grown to encompass more of the pitted metal and blood-stained deckplates. One of the lights was flickering gently now and the others had dimmed. It gave the room the look of a nightmare cast in blood and steel. Blake felt his combat senses whispering urgently to him, but they cleared the bridge and found nothing threatening among the shadows. Blake didn't feel very relieved.

"Alright," Trent said heavily, there was a lethargy in his voice that hadn't been there before. He had his helmet off and was lighting up a fresh cig. Everyone had arrived at the bridge at approximately the same time. "I think it's time to reset our priorities."

"How do you mean?" Starck asked succinctly. Trent rubbed the back of his head, running his gloved hand over his dark, buzzed hair. He sighed and blew a perfect smoke ring, then was silent as he watched it diffuse. Softly, he muttered,

"I'm too tired for this shit." Silence lingered after he said it and, abruptly, Trent shifted gears. He threw down his cigarette, stamped

on it with his boot and slipped his helmet back on. His visor went opaque and he turned to look at the others. Suddenly, he was all business.

"Blake, get on the LifeScan console, run it. I want to know who's alive on this ship besides us," he said. Blake nodded and sought out the console dedicated to LifeScan. After a moment, he found it, sat down and booted it up. It worked now, he saw, and he immediately began to program in a full scan of the entire ship. Trent walked over and stood behind him, staring over his shoulder. An uncomfortable moment passed and there was a soft chime.

A holographic display of the ship popped into view. Five dots were spread out across the ship, all but one of them stationary. Trent studied the schematic over Blake's shoulder for a moment longer, then nodded tightly and straightened back up.

"Justin and Ryan, you are staying on the bridge. Make sure it remains secure and help us with any information we might need in the field. Blake, you and Caldwell-"

"Hold on! I am not playing babysitter!" Ryan snapped. "There is no way I'm-" Trent whirled on the Corporal faster than Blake could track and abruptly shoved him to the ground. Ryan lost his balance and flew backwards, landing flat on his back. He began to surge to his feet but Trent shoved him back down, hard, with a boot to the chest.

"What part of 'chain of command didn't you pick up on in training, Corporal\_?!" Trent screamed so loud it hurt Blake's ears. There was dead silence on the bridge. No one moved. Everyone held their position and watched the situation play out.

"In case you haven't noticed, we're trapped onboard a ship with at least several hundred Flood Combat Forms, every one of which has the capacity and inclination to kill us! It is imperative that we all get along and play nice, or they will have us for dinner! Now, we are no longer at war anymore, Ryan. You're a good soldier, but I have no compunctions about tying you up and letting the Flood have you! Do you hear me!?"

Again, silence. It took Blake a moment, but he realized that his hands were shaking in adrenaline-fueled apprehension. He fought to get himself back under control. There was definitely something dangerous about Trent. Finally, after what felt like ages and eons, Ryan managed to utter a meek response.

"Yes, sir."

Trent pulled his boot off the Corporal's chest and turned to face the others. Ryan slowly began to climb to his feet. His face was hidden behind his visor and he remained completely silent. Trent continued as though he had never been interrupted.

"Blake, you and Caldwell are going to track down the two survivors holed up in the medical sector. You feel up to it?" Both men nodded and offered fairly level responses. Trent nodded back.

"Good. I'll go after the two holed up on the other side of the ship and then we'll deal with that one that's on the move. In fact, Ryan,

track him with the LifeScan and try to get into contact with him if you can. Cohen, you're going to take Starck, DJ and Weir to the communications grid. Figure out what's wrong with it, get it fixed, ASAP. No mistakes. Mistakes, nobody goes home. You hear me?" he asked.

They all responded affirmatively and left the bridge. Blake and Caldwell went shortly after them. Blake soon found himself walking slowly and cautiously down a lengthy, blood-stained corridor cast in flickering light. Caldwell was quiet beside him, inspecting the shadows and darker recesses of the corridor walls and ceiling.

"Man, that guy's really intense, huh?" Caldwell asked suddenly, as though attempting to jump-start the conversation.

"Yeah...but it's nice to see Ryan finally getting beat down. I really don't like that guy," Blake replied. And he meant it, too. Ryan was an asshole, there were no two ways around it.

"He doesn't seem so bad." Blake shook his head.

"No, he is. You're new, so you don't really know the social hierarchy of the team yet. Trust me, you don't want to make friends with that guy. He's kind of like...a frat house idiot. Like, he thinks it's funny to put your hand in warm water when you sleep or like...sneak into your room in the middle of the night, pull open your dresser drawer and take a piss all over your uniforms."

"That sounds...oddly specific. And that doesn't sound like a prank at all. It sounds like...just being an asshole." Blake sighed.

"Yeah. Ryan played a lot of 'pranks' on Weir and, I mean, you've seen him. You'd think the Yellowjackets, or at \_least\_ the ODSTs would weed out guys of his temperament. I mean, he can fight, no questions there, and he's a genius technically, but...socially..." Blake shook his head. "He'd just rather be left alone. And Ryan wouldn't leave well enough alone until I basically called him out in front of everyone."

"What'd he do?" Caldwell asked. They both snapped their guns up at as Combat Form leapt out of a side corridor. Both men put bullets through its chest and it flopped back to the deckplates, twitching violently. Blake put another pair of three-round bursts through its chest while Caldwell checked out the side passageway. It was empty.

"I think he wanted to fight me, but Whitley finally told him enough was enough. Heh. I would've fought him. Not sure if I'd've won though, to be honest. Guy is ripped and he knows his hand-to-hand. One of the worst kind of assholes." They both fell silent and kept walking, threading their way through the lonely corridors, heading for the medical wing of the \_Erebus\_. Blake began to feel uncomfortable and tried to restart the conversation once more.

"So...how are you liking the Yellowjackets?" he asked. Caldwell shrugged.

"It's okay. It's not as..." he sighed.

"Not as what?"

"Not as...I don't know...cinematic I guess is the only word I can think of. Yeah, it's not as cinematic as I thought it would be." Blake blinked. He wasn't sure he had ever heard such a statement made in his life.

"Cinematic?" he replied finally. Caldwell chuckled sheepishly.

"I dunno...don't tell the other guys I said this. Hell, I probably shouldn't be telling you but...I thought you might understand."

"Try me."

"Alright. Well...ever since I was a kid, I've always watched movies. Like war movies and thriller movies and adventure movies...basically anything that gets your adrenaline going, gets your heart pounding. And I always wanted to join up for the Marine Corps and go out and fight the bad guys. I guess you could say I was a real patriot. People always told me, 'You'll get shot!' or 'You'll get killed!' Or any of the other hundred thousand ways there are to die in war. And I think...my brain is broken. I mean, fundamentally, I think I'm broken, because nothing really scares me. I mean, I'm not trying to sound like badass or anything, I mean it literally: almost nothing scares me. It's caused me a lot of problems, because I'm so reckless.

"So I got into the Marines, took a lot of dumb risks and always came out alive in the end. Killed a lot of Covies, rose through the ranks. Once I hit Sergeant, I decided being in the Marines was boring. Heh. Crazy, I know. But I expected it...I guess I always expected it to be like the movies. Lots of last minute rescues and walking away from explosions and for life to always neatly fit together in a comprehensible package." He shrugged and Blake found himself enraptured by this insane take on life. Caldwell kept going.

"But it never did. Everything was always so messy and uncoordinated. I worked with cowards and morons and selfish climbers who wanted nothing more than to become Generals and order people to clean their clothes and cook their meals...So when I saw the opportunity to join up with the ODSs, I leaped at it. I thought, 'now here are some guys who know what they're doing. No more bullshit!' Only there was. Not as much as before, I'll admit, but still...humanity kept leaking in. It was just more of the same shit, different day."

He broke off abruptly as a wave of Infection Forms began to rain down on them from the several holes in the ceiling. Both men spent several moments popping the little alien monstrosities before continuing on, now almost to their destination. They found a small service elevator and stepped inside. Blake hit the down button.

"So you were looking for something like the movies in the Yellowjackets?" Blake asked. Caldwell nodded.

"Yeah, I guess so. And, I guess it's a step up. It's the closest I've come so far to my vision for what life should be. I guess the only step left is being a Spartan...I've been hearing rumors that they're initiating a Spartan-IV program and accepting volunteers. Maybe if and when that happens, I'll sign up for it."



Suddenly, they found themselves where they needed to be: a small storage compartment meant to hold spare medical supplies. Blake found himself suspicious. Despite what Caldwell had said about life not being very cinematic, and he was right, it almost never was, sometimes life did follow patterns. Usually, being in a heavy combat situation and suddenly finding yourself without very many enemies to fight might seem like a blessing, but it usually meant something bad was going happen. And soon. Blake wondered what it would be.

They opened up the storage bay and Caldwell nearly took a shotgun blast to the stomach. The survivor they found was a pale, sweaty man with wide eyes and limp hair in a torn, bloodied and burnt orange jumpsuit. He held a shotgun and had the wild look of a man who might do unfortunate things. Like blow away his rescuers.

"Whoa! Hold it!" Blake shouted.

The man slowly lowered the shotgun. Caldwell laughed and looked around the compartment. It was small and packed with crates on shelves. It looked almost completely untouched by the conflict, but it was obvious that this man had made it his home. There was a pile of medical-issue pillows and blankets on the ground that looked slept in, as well as several bottles of water, some rations and a small armory that mainly consisted of shotgun shells, a pistol and a few spare clips.

"Who are you?!" he demanded.

"Yellowjackets. We're here on a rescue op," Blake replied simply. The man's hands were shaking. He licked his lips.

"What?" he managed.

"We're here to rescue you...sort of," Caldwell replied.

"What do you mean, sort of?" the man replied uncertainty. Blake sighed.

"We've run into some complications, but we need to get you to the bridge." The man immediately began shaking his head.

"What do you mean 'complications'? What, you can't even keep yourselves safe?! I thought you Yellowjackets were supposed to be badass!" he cried, a manic, hysterical edge to his voice. Blake sighed again, heavier this time.

"Look, just come with us, alright!?" he snapped. The technician seemed to focus a little and his shoulder slumped slightly, as though defeated. "What's your name?" Blake asked, a little calmer. The man, resigned now, began to gather up his weapons.

"Connant," he replied simply. Blake thought about asking whether it was a first or last name, then ultimately decided against it, figuring it didn't matter. They managed to get Connant out and two minutes deeper into the medical section before he noticed that they weren't heading towards the bridge. He began to argue again.

"I thought you said we were going to the bridge!" he snapped in a harsh whisper.

"We are, but first we need to rescue another survivor that isn't far from here. He's holed up in an infirmary down this corridor. So just shut up and relax," Blake growled.

"No way! No one's left alive but me! I'm the sole survivor!" he said, almost proudly. Blake rolled his eyes and continually checked the shadows for more nightmares.

"We've got LifeScan, moron," Caldwell said. Blake chuckled and Connant didn't seem to have any response to that. They made the final approach on the infirmary in question and then hesitated. Blake could hear...\_something \_going on inside. Whatever it was, it sounded heavy and violent, as though several big things were being tossed around.

"Oh no, oh no..." Connant began to whisper.

Blake hissed for him to get back and he did so almost immediately, retreating further down the corridor. Blake and Caldwell moved up towards the door. Caldwell began to reach out and open the door when it abruptly exploded outwards. Blake and Caldwell were picked up and tossed back against the corridor wall. The breath was driven from Blake's lungs and he fought to look up and see what it was.

Stark, blind terror surged through him. This thing that stood before him, its head nearly brushing the top of the ceiling, was not an average Combat Form. It was enormous and looked to be made of burly, thick muscle. Its flesh was not rotten. It looked very, very deadly. Blake realized that this situation had just become a lot more dangerous. It was a Tank Form. The Flood had reached their next stage.

Caldwell began to shout something, but the beast surged forward and grabbed Blake up in one of its enormous hands. He felt tremendous pressure on his armor and knew that he had very little time to work with. A plan was tossed together in his head and he enacted it before he could think better of it. One of his arms was still free. Blake reached down and grabbed a grenade. He managed to get one of his fingers through the pin, then reared back and punched into the chest of the beast as hard as he could. It was just barely enough.

He left the grenade embedded in the Tank Form's chest and when he pulled his hand back, he pulled the pin. Then he closed his eyes and waited for the inevitable. Almost immediately it seemed there was a great explosion, and then suddenly Caldwell was standing over him, laughing mutely. For a second, Blake was terrified he'd gone deaf, then he realized his helmet's audio enablers had been blown out. He reset them.

"-craziest shit I've ever seen, man!" Caldwell cried happily, offering Blake a helping hand. He took it and was roughly pulled to his feet.

"Is it dead?" Blake asked, feeling dizzy. He was surprised to find that the glass covering his eye-holes were still basically intact. Well, it \_was\_EOD.

"Yeah. Blown to all hell. Even Connant was impressed. The bad news, however, is that the second guy we were supposed to rescue is dead. That thing killed him."

"Wonderful...better tell Trent." Blake activated his radio and almost immediately got a reply. He updated Trent on the situation.

"Well, that's too bad, but one is better than none. Get him back to the bridge, then link up with me at my second survivor's location and we'll figure out where to go from there."\_

## 6. Into Terror

**\*\*Chapter 06\*\*\_\*\***

**><strong>-Into Terror-\_\_**

Blake felt relief swell within him as he spied Trent and another man clad in bloodied, ballistics combat armor. They were standing outside of a storage chamber. That relief began to fade, however, as Blake came closer and began to smell something truly horrific. He closed his suit's vents and a second later the hiss of his own personal oxygen supply filtering into his suit sounded. The smell lingered, however, as he, Caldwell and Connant came closer. They closed the gap between them and came to stand next to Trent and his survivor.

"So, what's up?" Blake asked nervously.

"Something's wrong," Trent replied flatly. "That smell...I've never smelled anything like it. And yet it's familiar. Something to do with the Flood, I can tell you that much. The fourth stationary survivor is inside here. Be ready." Blake nodded and raised his battle rifle. Caldwell and Connant were silent beside him. The five of them approached the door, which was large and closed. Trent hit the access button and the door slid open.

The room beyond was revealed. It swam in an awful green mist that obscured vision and gave the room an oddly muted feel. Connant and the Marine were driven back, coughing violently, by the green mist. Blake, Trent and Caldwell were protected inside their suits. Trent moved forward, heedless, even as Connant began vomiting violently behind him, back out in the corridor. Blake surveyed the room and stared on in horror.

They had come to a messhall, a broad room taken up mostly by tables and benches bolted to the floor at mathematical intervals. Everything seemed to be covered in a disgusting, cloying green goo. It dripped from the ceilings, covered the lights so that the room was very dim and ran down the walls. It pooled on the floor and obscured the details of the room. Most horrifically of all, however, were the walls. They were covered with what had once been people.

Grotesque caricatures of human beings were pinned to the wall, suspended by the awful green substance. Almost all of them looked beyond the pale of saving. Their features were twisted in a way to resemble Flood Combat Forms, their limbs malformed. Only one sound broke the awful quiet of the messhall. It was a soft whimpering, almost crying. Trent, Blake and Caldwell slowly approached the last survivor in the room.

He looked barely human. One of his eyes had clouded over almost completely with blood, the other was contracted almost to encompass the entire eye. His teeth had points and odd protrusions and bulges

pushed out against the skin on his cheeks and jaw. He was almost completely covered in the green substance, leaving only his head exposed. It lulled gently from one side to another as he moaned in forsaken pain.

"Hey," Trent said softly, slinging his rifle and touching the man's face. "Hey, stay with me," he muttered. Some of the incoherency seemed to lift and the unclouded eye focused slowly onto Trent, Blake and Caldwell.

"Who're you?" he mumbled, his voice harsh but faint.

"Rescue team...what the hell happened here?" Trent replied. The man chuckled. It was a very ugly sound.

"They came...from the surface...overran us. Then they...took...some of us. Did things to us. Don't know what. Something not normal for Flood. I...too far gone...kill me, please." His head leaned forward again, as though the strain of holding it up was too much.

"What did they do?" Trent asked, urgency in his voice. The man shook his head gently, still looking at the ground.

"Don't know. Can't remember. Kill me." Trent sighed quietly, hesitated for just a moment, then pulled his pistol out and shot the man in the head. He convulsed once, then went slack. Trent sighed quietly.

"This...looks new," Blake said, shifting his focus to the nightmares that hung from the walls.

"Yeah, it is," Trent said quietly, looking around now, too. "I've taken on about three dozen separate instances with the Flood and I've reviewed everything there is to know about them. No one has encountered anything like this. It's bad. Very bad." Blake slowly approached one of the more twisted and transformed creatures.

It looked like a Combat Form, but...leaner, more gaunt, like it could move much faster than a regular one. And the face...he shuddered. Even by Flood standards these things were disgusting and terrifying.

"We're going to have to kill them all. If I had to guess, I'd say this was some kind of new form of incubation. The Infection Forms can burrow and transform in a matter of minutes, and to be sure, what they produce is certainly lethal. But we've all seen the Pure Forms. They take longer. These things might be a cut above the Pure Forms...or an offshoot...or something else entirely. Whatever the case, I'd rather not find out."

At that moment, almost as if one cue, the eyes of the one Blake was studying snapped open. They were completely black in nature, almost like staring into black holes, the utter absence of light. The thing issued a horrid shriek and began thrashing about violently. Blake cried out, brought his gun up and put three rounds through its head. Its skull split like a ripe melon, but it kept thrashing as though nothing had happened.

All around them the beasts woke. The sleep of reason had ended.

"Fall back!" Trent was screaming. "Fall back to the corridor!" Gunfire sounded as the beasts tore themselves free of the webbing like it was so much moist tissue paper. Blake noted with terror that the one he'd decapitated was still moving freely. He put a pair of three-round bursts through its chest and finally it flopped back to the floor. He turned and shot out the chest of another one advancing rapidly on him as he backed out.

Its chest was blown out, but still it kept coming as though nothing was wrong. He cried out in frustration and blew its head off. It flopped back to the ground, twitching violently. He realized the nature of the situation with an immediate horror.

"They've got redundant systems!" he cried. "You've gotta take out the chest and the head!" He screamed to be heard over the din of combat. From the corridor, the Marine and Connant were firing off their weapons, providing support. Blake took in the form of the creatures as they advanced rapidly on the retreating trio. They were in fact leaner, and shorter, barely topping six feet in height. Their muscles were wiry and tightly coiled, almost like steel cables. Their hands ended in jagged, wickedly curved, serrated claws and their skin had taken on a blacker tone.

One of them leaped past the gunfire and tackled Caldwell. He screamed as he was felled. Blake moved forward to help him, but almost instantly three more of the beasts fell on him. Before he was consumed by a writhing mass of claws and teeth, Blake spied Caldwell pulling the pin on one of his grenades. He and Trent bolted for the door and barely made it out as all of Caldwell's grenades went off in rapid succession.

The quartet of survivors lined up in the corridor, in front of the door, their weapons pointed inwards. Silence fell ominously. The room was now covered almost completely in a sea of smoke and green mist, dropping the visibility to zero. Trent began to move forward, perhaps to secure the door, when one leaped from the swirling smoke. It pounced and landed squarely on the Marine Trent had found previously.

He shrieked shrilly as the claws dug into his flesh, rending meat and snapping bone. Blood flew thickly upon the air, spraying the others. Trent and Blake converged their gunfire upon the beast and dropped it in seconds. Before its body had hit the ground, Trent rushed forward and secured the door, closing it.

"Holy shit," Connant whispered.

"Definitely a new breed," Trent growled. Silence began to fall, but was immediately interrupted by the radio. It crackled to life in a haze of static.

"Trent, Cohen here. We've managed to make emergency repairs to the comms network. Unfortunately, we've come as far as we can internally. It seems that there's some external damage as well, of all things. We're all heading for an airlock to get it fixed. Shouldn't take more than half an hour, forty-five minutes tops, then we can call for help."\_

"Excellent. Keep going, Cohen. Great job."

\_"We're on it."\_ Almost before Cohen finished talking, Ryan's voice suddenly exploded onto the channel.

\_"Guys! Guys, something's happening to the oxygen!"\_ he cried, his voice shot through with plentiful panic. Trent sighed quietly.

"Slow down, Corporal. Tell me what's happening. What's wrong with the oxygen?"

\_"Life Support has been shut off. Oxygen isn't being processed anymore. We're going to suffocate!"\_ Trent sighed wearily. Blake felt fear rising in him. He immediately stopped using his internal oxygen supply, then popped his neck to try and relieve some of the tension.

"Alright, give me directions to the atmospheric processor. Blake and I will take care of it." He turned. "Connant, can you find your way to the bridge? We aren't too far away." Connant looked around nervously, then finally nodded.

"Yeah, I can."

"Alright. Hurry up and then announce yourself before you get there so they don't freak out and shoot you. Ryan, those directions?" Blake watched Connant go and made himself listen as Ryan rattled off instructions on how to get to the atmospheric processor. Luckily, it wasn't too far away. After receiving the instructions, Trent informed them that not only Caldwell had been killed, but three of the five survivors on the ship.

The response was somber and morose. Blake and Trent began making their way towards the atmospheric processor. As they did, a thought occurred to Blake.

"Hey, Ryan. Why are you so worried about the atmosphere? This is a huge ship, shouldn't we have at least like...days of air?"

\_"Normally, yeah. But right now? No. Portions of the ship are atmospherically compromised, and other parts are being overrun by some kind of foreign gas I imagine is coming from the Flood. We've got about ten hours breathable air, but that's not staying stable. It's diminishing. Apparently the atmospheric processor was the only thing combating this. We need it back on sooner rather than later,"\_ Ryan explained.

"Fantastic," Trent muttered. They arrived at the entrance to the bay a moment later...only to find it locked down tight.

"Ryan, we need you to unlock the atmospheric processor bay," Trent said, sounding annoyed. There was a pause, then,

\_"I can't...it's been locked down in a way that I can't get past. It's some kind of special security lock. Apparently...the only way to get past it is to manually override it. At two separate locations. At the same time. Here, I'm forwarding the information to a nearby console. It should be just to the right of the doors to atmospheric processing."\_

Blake and Trent gathered around the terminal and studied the screen. Blake frowned. This was called divide and conquer. Trent was silent. He seemed tense. Finally, he seemed to nod to himself and straightened up.

"Alright, these aren't too far away. They're both security centers. I'll take the one to the left. Blake, you got the map memorized to yours?" Blake nodded. "Good. Being a security center it should have some spare bullets lying around. See what you can pick up. And...Ryan. What's the location on that fifth survivor, still mobile?"

\_"Uh...yeah. He's in one of the maintenance areas of the ship, belowdecks."\_

"You ever get a chance to talk to him?"

\_"No. I tried several times. Never a response. I think he's ignoring me."\_ Trent was silent for a moment, then began speaking again.

"Starck, you outside yet?"

\_"No. We're almost to the airlock, why?"\_

"I've got a special job for you. Talk with Ryan about the location of the fifth survivor. Find him, bring him to the bridge. And...watch yourself."

\_"Understood."\_ Trent turned to look at Blake.

"You good to go?" Blake nodded.

"Yeah."

"Alright, see you on the other side."

They split up then, each making for separate sides of the corridor they were in. Blake had the route memorized. He'd always been good with maps and spatial orientation. Just follow the corridor to its end, turn right, turn left, take a lift down to the next floor and the security center would be just down the way. Not so difficult. Blake hurried along, wary for Flood. He found himself left alone with his thoughts as he wandered the lonely desolation of the Erebus. He was thinking of Caldwell. Had he been satisfied with his death?

Going out under a pile of monsters with a grenade was a fairly cinematic way to go out, Blake suspected. He'd seen it in enough movies. He wondered if that was to be his fate: death on this plague ship, so far away from anything he might call home. Surprisingly, Blake found the notion filled him with more fear than it would have even a day ago. What was changing about him? Sure, the Erebus presented a pretty shitty situation, even by Yellowjacket standards, but he'd always known this could happen.

Maybe it was Trent and his job offer. Had he made one? Blake seemed to remember asking and not getting a straight answer. Did the possibility of a new job really entice him to live so? Or was it just that he was sick of the Flood after months of cleaning out these

infestations. Blake understood that the burnout rate on Yellowjackets was almost as high as the mortality rate. He'd been with Echo Squad for four months and had already seen a dozen new faces since his first day. Maybe it was high time for him to burn out.

Blake reached the elevator and stepped in. He rode it down to the next level, stepped out and immediately found himself facing down half a dozen Flood. Most of them were regular Combat Forms, but there was a Lancer among them. Blake immediately sighted it and blew out its chest, sending it and its pole-arm crashing to the ground. He began to back up as he targeted and fired, targeted and fired, letting his body take over.

He managed to drop the remaining five before his ammunition ran out, but as Blake began to reload, more of them came from around the corner further down the passageway and began charging towards him. They shrieked like demons as he brought his gun up once more. However, as he started to open fire, something strange happened.

Instantly, almost as though they'd hit an invisible wall, the charging Combat Forms stopped moving. Not a sound was made. They seemed to be looking up. Blake risked a cautious glance upward, but he could see nothing, just the ceiling and ventilation grates. He began to get nervous. Suddenly, an echoing roar, unlike any he had heard thus far, sounded. It was so loud it caused cracks to run down the nearby windows. The Combat Forms turned and ran, sprinting down the corridor and disappearing around the corner from whence they came.

Blake swallowed nervously. He began make his way hurriedly towards the security center. Something was nearby. Something incredibly dangerous. As Blake neared the center, he suddenly began to feel thick reverberations. He recognized what it was immediately: footsteps. Something was overhead, on the next level, walking around. Walking closer. Blake slipped into the security center and the footsteps stopped.

Blake let out a small sigh of relief and fired up the security center. The room was small and mostly empty. The battle had come and gone here, leaving the weapons lockers cleaned out. While he got into contact with Trent and waited for the system to boot up, he scavenged a few scattered clips for his rifle.

"I'm here and uh..."

\_"Yes?"\_

"There's...something. Something big on the next floor up. It's huge, it must be. And it...ah...it scared away the other Flood." Trent was silent for a few seconds.

\_"Just fantastic. Alright, let's just get this done with. Are you ready?"\_ Blake moved into position, then pulled up the lock subroutine.

"Yeah. Ready. Finger's on the button."

\_"Alright. On 'go'. Three...two...one...go."\_ Blake pressed the button. There was a slight pause, then a positive sound. \_"Okay. It's



open. Meet me back at the atmospheric processor and...hope you don't run into whatever that big thing is. We're going to have to burn this whole ship."\_

Blake thought it was a good idea. He was beginning to really loathe the Erebus. Even the name spoke of ominous foreboding. He hurried out of the security center and began making his way back to the lift. They would fix the atmospheric processor, then the comms array, then call for help and-Blake glanced up as he heard a curious groaning sound. He realized that a portion of the ceiling was very damaged and it seemed to be buckling, almost, as though there were some great weight on it-Blake's eyes widened and he dove forward.

The ceiling exploded downwards, spraying the corridor with metal fragments like shrapnel. Blake barely dove out of the way and scrambled to his feet as something enormous landed in the corridor with him. He turned and risked a glance. Then wished he hadn't. Whatever it was, however it had been made, it was enormous. It had to hunch to fit in the corridor properly. It was roughly humanoid, in the sense that it had limbs and a head and a torso. But that's where the resemblance ended.

The beast reached for him with arms of blackened flesh, tight with muscle that rippled beneath the flesh and spoke of horrific power. Its fingers ended in hooked claws and its face...Blake had seen a great deal of nightmare-inducing terrors before, in his time. But this thing's face had almost certainly come from the depths of Hell itself. It had no eyes, no nose, simply a mouth. A perfectly round mouth that took up the entire face, the interior of which was ringed with jagged, bloody teeth that spun like the teeth of a chainsaw.

Blake bolted, not even bothering to try and fight it. How was he going to get away? The beast issued a marrow-freezing roar and started off after him. The only thing that kept it from getting to him immediately was its sheer size. It wasn't meant for corridors such as these. Blake spied something up ahead, the corridor beyond him was ringed with something and he remembered what it was: a pressure door.

It was thick and solid and could be activated in the event of an atmospheric compromise. He rushed towards it, running faster than he ever had before, and broke the emergency seal. He began rapidly pressing the button, knowing that this would have to work. He couldn't outrun this thing forever. Blake let out a tremendous sigh of relief as the pressure door slammed down into place between them. The monster let out another nightmarish roar and slammed into the door. Blake leaped back from it, suddenly wondering if it was going to work.

The beast slammed into the door once, causing a huge dent to appear. A second time, a second dent. A third, a fourth. Blake prepared himself for the worst. Then, nothing. A few seconds of tension-soaked silence passed, then the sound of receding footsteps was heard. Blake let out another sigh of relief and decided it was high time to get back to Trent. He turned and began hurrying down the passageway.

**\*\*Chapter 07**  
**><strong>\_-Gravity-\_-**

As Blake closed in on the atmospheric processor, his terror finally began to subside. He'd had a lot of close calls in his time, a great deal of near-death experiences involved with both the Covenant and the Flood. But that...\_thing\_, that monstrosity...it was truly something else. It had awoken a deep fear in him, something primal and base from the days when lightning and thunder were regarded with absolute terror.

He came around the final corner and spotted Trent up ahead. As he drew closer, he realized the man was engaged in conversation. Blake waited until the conversation was wrapped up, then listened as Trent turned to face him.

"That was Cohen. We've got a problem. They're on the exterior of the ship and they need back up. I'd send Starck, but I can't seem to get hold of her. I need you to go and back them up. I'll stay here and get to work on the atmospheric processor." Blake hesitated.

"Can you fix it?" Trent shrugged.

"It shouldn't be too hard. I took a few basic tech courses during my initial training and I've picked up some stuff over the years." Blake nodded and hurried over to the terminal, firing it up and memorizing the route to the airlock Cohen and the others were located at. After a moment he had it, then he was off, hurrying away from Trent and the processor. With everyone dying all around him, it was easy for Blake to envision Weir going down.

That was something he couldn't let happen. It was too painful to even think about, let alone live through. So he hurried on through the ship, rushing too fast for caution's sake through the derelict corridors and flickering rooms. Distantly, things growled and shrieked. The sounds of the plague ship. Blake was hung up only twice before he reached the airlock, dispatching the handfuls of Combat Forms he ran into along the way.

Once he reached the airlock in question, he hooked up to an oxygen tank, refilled his personal supply and then stepped into the airlock and activated his magnetic boots. No time for a tether. He began to cycle through.

"This is Blake, how are you guys doing out there?" he asked, waiting impatiently for the cycle to complete.

\_"Not good,"\_ Cohen replied. His voice was calm, but there was desperation hidden in his composure.

"Coming out now." The airlock ran its cycle. Blake hurried out, clanging mutely against the metal hull as he stepped out. Up ahead, he spied the shoulder-mounted lights of the others punching holes in the vast, desolate darkness that engulfed the \_Erebus\_. Various Combat Forms and Lancers were advancing from their dark nests among the ruined hull. Their movements were slow but steady, and very disturbing in the silence.

Blake hurried forward, raising his battle rifle and punching holes

through the chests of the Lancers. They took notice of him as he opened fire and three Lancers broke away from the main group and began making headway towards them. He fired on them and managed to put down two before the third reached him. He narrowly avoided its pole-arm, which shot past him, then banged against him as the Flood tried to press the attack.

Blake barely managed to bring his rifle around in time before it lined up for another shot. He fired, punched ugly holes through its chest that sent it flying off the surface of the ship and spinning off into the dead depths of space. He breathed a sigh of relief and hurried on, taking down the Combat Forms that the others hadn't yet murdered. Once they were dead and floating off into space, Blake hurriedly joined the others. He did a quick headcount and was grateful to find Cohen, Weir and DJ all well and accounted for.

"Good timing," DJ said grimly.

"Get back to work. We'll watch your back," Cohen replied. DJ and Weir nodded, turned and returned to their work on the open panels alongside a comms relay. Blake turned his gaze out across the vast hull of the broken ship. Along its dark surface, lights occasionally flickered or flared or burned sullenly, like the dying gasps of some enormous sea creature. Blake came to stand next to Cohen and waited. He could sense them out there, the nightmarish creatures wrapped in decayed flesh, dipped in coagulated blood.

For several moments, there was a peace and tranquility. Then they came. Not the Combat Forms, or even the Lancers. No, it was the new ones that came. The ones Blake had encountered in the messhall. The ones he had begun to think of as the Claws. There were a dozen of them, coming from the right, making disturbingly rapid progress across the hull. Like blackened, insane jaguars racing across a metallic field.

Blake and Cohen began to pick them off as quickly as they could. DJ and Weir glanced up briefly, looking as though they wanted to join in the fray, but instead opted to focus on hurrying and finishing the repairs. Blake began to get worried as he reloaded. They'd managed to drop six of them, but there were six more, and they were coming in hot. He brought his rifle to bear once more, then cried out as two of them jumped.

Blake saw that the two were splitting up, one coming for him, one coming for Cohen. He put down the one coming for him. Cohen wasn't so lucky. There was a brief scream as the Claw landed on him, tore him free of his magnet boots and began to eviscerate him. Both of them became a tangle of flailing limbs as they flew off into space. Blake turned his attention back to the surface as he spied the final four making for Weir and DJ.

Blake shouted an inarticulate warning, which caused one of them to break away from the main group and come for him. He managed to put it down and spied both DJ and Weir rising up from their position, guns ready. Between the three of them, they managed to kill the remaining Claws. Blake let out a long sigh of relief.

"How much longer?" he asked.

"We're done, actually. Let's get back inside," DJ felt relief flow through him as the trio hurriedly made their way back into the airlock. As they slipped into the airlock and let it run its cycle, Blake called up Trent.

"Trent, Blake here. We've managed to finish the repairs but...we lost Cohen in the process. He's gone."

"Goddammit!" \_Trent was silent for a moment after that, then began speaking again. Ryan cut him off abruptly.

"Whoa, holy shit. Guys, I just lost Starck's life signs."\_

"Like a glitch? What do you mean?" Blake asked.

"I mean all her life signs suddenly ceased. She might be dead...she was really close to that fifth survivor."\_

"Son of a bitch...alright, everyone listen up. Blake, I want you and-" \_Trent abruptly stopped speaking at the same time as Blake felt his stomach start rolling. He, Weir and DJ had walked out of the airlock and deactivated their magnetic boots by then. Suddenly, the three of them began to float free of the ground, as did everything else in the immediate area.

"Son of a bitch!" DJ cried.

"What the hell's going on!?"\_ Ryan demanded.

"Someone cut the damned gravity...shit. Blake, DJ, Weir, get to the gravity bay, fix it. Ryan, get to Starck's last known location. Figure out if she's dead or not. Justin, Connant, hold down the bridge and get to work on getting a message out." \_Trent gave out the orders.

"What are you going to be doing?" Blake asked as he struggled to get back to the ground.

"I'm going to be dealing with that last survivor. He must be the one responsible for our recent slew of bad luck, at least most of it."\_

"Alright, we'll get on it." Blake, Weir and DJ managed to get to the floor and reactivate their magnetic boots. They hustled over to a nearby terminal and memorized the quickest route to the gravity bay and then set off, their magnetic boots clanging loudly as they made their way through the ruined corridors.

At first, the going was quick and easy. The three of them made quick work of the deck they were on. But once they hit a lift and took it one floor down, they found themselves back in Flood territory. Blake stepped out of the lift, looked left, then right, then found himself staring at a half dozen Claws. They had their backs to him, but already they were turning. He cursed, pulled the pin on a pair of grenades and tossed them.

Pulling himself back into the lift, Blake waited, his gun pointed towards the door. There were twin explosions and one of the bodies flew past the doorway. When nothing came for them, the trio stepped out into the corridor.

"How were they standing like that, rooted to the ground?" Blake asked, more to himself than the others. Weir pointed.

"Look." Blake felt his hope diminish slightly as he spied what Weir was pointing at. Some of their legs had survived intact, and sported the same black claws as their hands. They had dug into the metal of the ground, mooring themselves in the zero gravity. Too powerful. These things were way too powerful. It wasn't fair...Blake shook himself mentally and focused. The gravity bay, they had to get to the gravity bay.

They hurried down the passageway and turned another corner. Blake narrowly avoided a pole-arm attached to a Lancer that had launched itself. He cried out and fell back, almost disconnecting himself from the deckplates. He fired from his awkward position and managed to catch the beast in its side. Weir and DJ finished it off, and the two Combat Forms that floated awkwardly around the corner as well.

Blake lurched to his feet and kept going, peering cautiously around the corner. The gravity bay ingress was just down the passageway. It looked clear. They moved down it. Blake and DJ secured the area while Weir opened the door. The bay beyond was clear: a large, open-faced room, most of which was studded with readouts for equipment housed behind the walls. Blake felt a bit of relief, no cover, but nowhere for the Flood to hide, either.

They entered the bay and locked it down. Weir made for the nearest console and began to run a diagnostic on the system. Blake found himself standing next to DJ, who looked very grim and pale. He suddenly urged for conversation.

"What do you think of our chances?" he asked quietly. DJ shook his head, fixed Blake with his bright blue eyes.

"I don't like them," he muttered glumly. "We're getting picked off one by one. Whitley, Barclay, Caldwell, Cohen, Peters...Justin's down for the count and now Starck might be dead." He heaved a world-weary sigh. "We've been on some shit missions before, but...good lord, this one might be the worst." Blake nodded.

"Guys! I figured it out. Someone shot out two of the primary power relays. We're going to have to replace them. Probably about a twenty minute procedure," Weir called. Blake looked from Weir back to DJ.

"You two get on it, I'll watch the door." DJ nodded and moved to join Weir. They hurried, splitting up and moving to the separate power relays. Blake watched them work for several moments as they pulled open the panels and began to work on the innards of the ship. He sighed and popped his neck, back and shoulders, trying to relieve the crazy amount of tension that had wormed its way into his body.

Time passed in awkward fragments. Blake supposed he should be happy with the lack of enemies, but he soon found himself pacing back and forth. About halfway through their repairs, Ryan's voice, grim and determined, came onto the air.

"Guys...I just found Starck...she's dead." Blake felt another piece of his heart fragment at that. Another one of them was dead. Trent's

voice was just as grim.

\_"How'd she die?"\_

\_"Shot through the visor."\_

\_"Shit...alright. Get back to the bridge. I'll join you there shortly. Guys, hows those repairs coming? I'd sure love me some gravity," \_Trent said.

"Almost done, actually," DJ replied.

\_"Alright. When you get done, get to the bridge."\_

"Roger that." They kept going. Another five minutes passed in uncomfortable silence while Blake paced and thought about Starck's death. When her vitals had cut out, he knew it was likely that she was dead, vitals didn't cut out for no good reason. But still, he'd been hoping. He'd always had a bit of a thing for her. Now he had nothing. No, not nothing. He turned and glance at Weir. He at least had his sort-of little brother.

"And we...are...done!" Weir called, excitement creeping into his voice. Abruptly, Blake felt his stomach roll once more and grunted slightly as the effects of gravity came back into play. All over the ship, things crashed to the floor.

"Let's get out of here," Blake muttered. The trio headed for the door, opened it and stepped out into the corridor beyond. Something was wrong, of that Blake was immediately aware and certain of. He looked right, nothing there. He looked left-and froze in absolute, mind-numbing terror. The beast from the before with the chainsaw teeth and no face waited for them, crouching awkwardly despite how tall the corridor was.

DJ began to shout something, but it reached forward and grabbed him. In one hand, it had his torso, in the other, his legs. DJ screamed as he was ripped in half. The monster tossed the torso aside and fed the still twitching legs into its chainsaw mouth.

"Run!" Blake cried. But there was no time. The monster was already moving forward. It made a grab for Weir, who ducked-but not fast enough. Blake was sprayed with blood as the creature managed to grab Weir's skull in its surprisingly deft grip and tear it right off his body. Blood fountained and the body took a few awkward steps before collapsing.

After that, Blake's memory was very faulty. He remembered running. He remembered crying and screaming. Briefly, he remembered Trent's voice, calling to him, but it was incomprehensible to him.

He had gone insane.

When the haze lifted, Blake found himself staring up through a film of unshed tears at Trent. He was in somewhere tight, a maintenance shaft he realized after a second.

"Hey, kid...are you alright?" Trent asked softly. Blake felt dizzy, his throat dry. The world swam as he nodded, and he groaned.

"I um...what happened?" he asked. But he knew even as he asked the question. Weir. He was gone. And DJ, too. Blake prepared himself for a wave of insanity-fueled despair, but none came. He felt...strangely calm. Dead, in fact.

"Don't answer that," he said as he allowed Trent to help him up out of the maintenance shaft. "I think I broke," he added quietly. Trent nodded.

"Yeah...I managed to gather what happened from your, ah, transmissions. But just hang on a little bit longer, Blake...we're almost out of here. We just need to make the call and then wait it out," Trent said.

"Actually, it's not that simple. We've overlooked some damage in the comms network. We need to make one more repair if we're going to make the call," \_Justin said over the radio. Blake and Trent glanced at each other.

"I hate my life," Trent grumbled.

## 8. Pressure

**\*\*Chapter 08**

**><strong>-Pressure-**

Blake and Trent made their way through the \_Erebus\_. The ship seemed to have taken on a nightmarish life of its own. The sounds of oxygen filtrating through the vents were disturbingly close to that of respiration now. The hum of power had taken on an oddly haunting quality. There were other noises, both distant and nearby, hidden in shadows and echoes, that suggested the Flood were not only alive but flourishing. As they turned another corner and peered cautiously down it, Trent opened up a link with the bridge.

"Justin, I want you to prep and launch an emergency beacon. Download all the files into it, let people know what went on here. Just in case we don't make it."

"Alright, I'll get right on it."\_

Distantly, Blake could hear shrieking and pounding. He swallowed nervously as they navigated the dimly-lit passageway. The damage was in one of the primary relays for the communications network. It wasn't getting the power it needed and, from the way Connant had described it for them, it would be a simple repair, just a few circuits needed to be replaced. It often irked Blake how easily important things seemed to break.

The pair silently turned another corner and came to the final corridor. They took out a pair of Claws that were hanging around the main entryway, secured the area and then came into the relay center. The next few moments played out in silence as Trent went about making the quick repair and Blake guarded the door. While he waited, he found himself wondering what could possibly be coming next.

So far, this mission had been a litany of mistakes, bad luck and outright sabotage. Sabotage...that thought made Blake think of the mysterious fifth survivor. He had never gotten the actual information

on that. He'd been too hung up on Weir...he felt a flicker of pain, like gently probing a deep, deadly wound, and turned away from that thought.

"Hey, Trent...what ever happened to that fifth survivor? The one you went to, uh, take care of?" Blake asked. Trent responded without turning, continuing his work.

"I killed him. He tried to kill me. Guy was a whackjob. Kept going on about 'cleansing the ship'. Not sure what he was actually trying to do but I put him down."

"Man...we only managed to rescue one guy from however many hundreds of people that were on this ship. That really sucks."

"Yeah, it does. But, sometimes, that's the job. We should be lucky to have rescued Connant." He suddenly stepped back and closed the panel. "There. Done. That was easy. Justin, I made the repair, what's the situation? We good to go?"

\_"Yes, but...we've just made a very unfortunate discovery. The reactor is getting ready to go critical. It's got about a twenty-minute fuse before it blows and takes us with it. Connant says he can make the repairs necessary to keep it from blowing, but he needs to be escorted through the ship to get to it," \_Justin replied apologetically.

"How did we miss this?!" Trent cried.

\_"I have no idea and Connant says there's not enough time to explain."\_

"Goddammit...Ryan, are you at the bridge yet?"

\_"Yeah, I'm here."\_

"Alright. Escort Connant to the reactor bay and I'll--"

\_"Can I come?"\_ Justin asked suddenly. \_"I'm going nuts on this bridge and I feel a lot better now. I gotta feel useful, Trent."\_ His voice was wheedling, insistent now. Trent sighed.

"Alright, fine. Help Ryan escort Connant to the reactor bay. I'll meet you guys there and we'll get this sorted out. Blake, get to the bridge. Make the call. Can you do that?" Blake nodded and did a quick check of his weapons and armor.

"Yeah, I'm good to go."

"Alright, let's get to it people. We're almost out of here."

Blake and Trent left the relay center and split up. Blake hurried down the passageway, making for the bridge, eager to be free of the ruined derelict that had been his home for what felt like ages and eras. He was exhausted, covered in sweat, hungry, thirsty and in pain, both mentally and physically. He knew, at some point, he was going to break, or maybe that he had already and it was going to catch up with him. But he would deal with Weir's death at some future date, probably as soon as he was free of the \_Erebus\_.



But he was close, so close now, to freedom. Blake once more found himself thinking about his own life, his own mortality, and his future. If he managed to somehow survive this living nightmare cast in blood and steel, then what would he do? The most logical course of action was to just get transferred to another Yellowjacket squad, put back on that industrial-yellow armor and clean out another Flood infestation.

But would that be the best course of action? Blake had joined the Yellowjackets because he had a death wish. He had known this objectively, almost academically and clinically, as though he were viewing himself from the outside. He was suicidal. But it wasn't until now really that he knew, emotionally, what that meant.

Why did he want to die? Because he felt as though he had nothing left. And maybe that was true now more than ever, with Weir gone. But standing there, at the precipice of death, Blake found himself backing away from the edge. He wanted to live. It was just a plain, simple fact. But what did he want to do with his life? It was a question he'd asked Trent, and he meant it. What was the point of living if most of life was misery?

Blake reached the bridge very suddenly, it seemed. He supposed he would have to answer this question at a future date...provided he even made it off the Erebus. As Blake moved forward to hit the access button, his radio abruptly screamed to life.

"This is Ryan! We're at the reactor bay and we're being overrun by the sons of bitches! There's got to be a couple of dozen of them!"\_ he screamed. "\_Where are you, Trent?!"\_

"I'm on my way. I got hung up by some of the new ones and a few Pure Forms,"\_ Trent replied, sounding distracted amid a hail of gunfire and roars.

"Do you guys need me?" Blake asked.

"No. Get that message out first, Blake. Then we can all have a house-warming party at the reactor bay."\_

"Got it." Blake hit the access button and stepped into the bridge, glancing briefly over his shoulder as something growled behind him, not too far away. He spied nothing out in the corridor, but when he returned his gaze back to the bridge, he froze in abject terror. There was a huge hole in the floor and, standing there in all its horrific glory was the creature without a name. The twelve foot tall monster with a circular chainsaw for a face.

Blake raised his rifle and began firing, aiming for the head. It was all he could think of to do. The beast roared and began coming for him, seemingly invulnerable. Blake realized suddenly that bullets weren't the answer, they were practically bouncing off its hardened skin as it was. He looked around, trying to find some way to defeat it. Some part of his mind realized that surely there must have been some other method of communication beyond the bridge, somewhere else in the ship. But this wasn't about comms anymore.

He wanted this thing dead. Needed it dead. He had precious few seconds. He spied the windows, along the far wall. They were cracked, weakened. Blake had a plan. He ducked out of the deft grasp of the

monster and rolled forward, between its legs. Recovering, he bolted for the window, priming the rest of his grenades. He sealed his suit, then began to hurl the grenades in rapid succession against the windows.

The deckplates rumbled as the monster came for him, eager for his flesh. He could hear the impossible, organic grinding of its chainsaw face. The grenades began to explode. Blake dodged again, narrowly avoiding its grasp once more. The monster roared in frustration. Suddenly, Blake heard the telltale sign of an atmospheric compromise. The windows blew out as the final grenade went off. He immediately felt the effects of the escaping atmosphere, rushing past him. The monster began to fall forward, flailing.

Blake managed to get a good grasp on one of the consoles as the atmosphere continued to vent. He watched as the monster lost what little balance and grip it had and flew out through the ruined windows, roaring mutely as it went. He began to crawl towards the comms console, noting that the bridge had sealed and already the amount of atmosphere was reduced by half. By the time he made it to the comms console, the atmosphere had been vented from the bridge and he was floating free in the room, as the gravity had failed as well.

He patched the communications into his suit's radio and then set it to scan the frequencies, putting out a general distress call as he made for the exit. He managed to get it open, fought past the out-rushing atmosphere and then closed it firmly behind him. He was alone in the corridor beyond, and perked up immediately as he heard a response.

\_"This is the UNSC\_ Elemental\_, we hear you, \_Erebus\_. What is your situation?"\_

"This is Lance Corporal Blake of the Yellowjackets. My team has suffered heavy casualties aboard the \_Erebus\_ to the Flood and we need immediate evacuation."

\_"Roger that, Lance Corporal. We're in the next system over, but we can be there within one hour."\_

"Oh...thank you, Elemental. We will be eagerly awaiting your arrival. Blake out."

\_"Affirmative."\_ Blake let out a long sigh, feeling a great deal of tension go out of him. Someone was coming for them. After a moment, he called up Trent.

"Trent, I've managed to get into contact with another ship. A UNSC ship. They're an hour out and they're coming for us." When Trent responded, it was amidst a symphony of gunfire, explosions and inhuman shrieking.

\_"Well, that sucks because we've got maybe ten minutes before we won't need no rockets to fly through space. I got to the reactor bay. Connant, Justin and Ryan are dead. They were overwhelmed by the Flood and I can't get to the controls, there's just too many of them. I need you to manually eject the reactor core from the bridge. It should be simple, just get into the Captain's personal computer, find the directorate and when it challenges you for authorization, put in

Alpha Echo November One One Seven and eject the core. Got that?"\_

Blake didn't relish the thought of going back onto the bridge, but he responded positively, turned and opened the bridge once more. Once he was sure he was still alone, he secured the door behind him and hurried over to the Captain's chair. He settled into it and quickly began to navigate the console set into the chair. The minutes passed in frozen solitude aboard the soundless, airless bridge while Blake worked.

He felt the tension welling back up as he finally found the proper command and punched in the code Trent had given him. There was a brief pause that made him began to really worry, and then the final query popped up.

**\*\*Emergency Launch Reactor Core: Y/N?\*\***

He eagerly punched Y and then stood up. As he began to free himself of the bridge, something, not a sound but a vibration through the deckplates, garnered his attention. He turned around and nearly screamed as he spied the enormous Flood creature he thought he was rid of. It was crawling back in through the broken windows now, staring at him in that impossible way that things without eyes stared at you.

Blake hurriedly got the door open, slipped through, then locked it firmly behind him. He started running away from the bridge even as he heard a loud \_bang\_ reverberate through the area.

"Trent, I managed to launch the core but we've got a \_huge\_ problem!" he cried.

\_"What now!?"\_ Trent demanded. Behind him, the bridge door exploded inwards and the atmosphere began to rush past him.

"That huge Flood I ran into before? It's back with a vengeance and I'm having a really difficult time killing it!" He could hear as well as feel the tremendous pounding of the monster's feet as it chased after him. He didn't dare look back.

\_"Shit!...Alright, look, remember that hangar we first landed in? Get there. Fast."\_

"But why-"

\_"Just do it!"\_

"On my way." Blake kept running, hurrying into an adjacent corridor and running for all he was worth. The creature bellowed and kept up the chase behind him, intent on killing the last of the survivors onboard the \_Erebus\_. Seconds passed, then minutes. Blake didn't know how long he had run, only that by the time the hangar door and Trent came into view, his legs were like rubber and he was drenched in sweat.

"Come on!" Trent called. Blake sprinted the rest of the distance and finally met up with the last man besides himself alive on the ship.

"Where is it?" he asked, opening the hangar door.

"Don't you hear it?!" Blake cried. Trent began to respond as the door opened, then fell silent and nodded as he heard the loud pounding noises. As both men began to enter the hangar, finding it empty, the monster rounded the corner, caught sight of them and bellowed tremendously as it rushed down the corridor towards them.

"What's the plan?" Blake asked. Trent pointed to a nearby Pelican.

"Get onboard and blow the bastard up with the missiles onboard," he replied simply. Blake hesitated, but just for a second, then nodded and hurried over to the Pelican. He found the emergency escape hatch beneath the cockpit and began climbing the short ladder that led to it. As he popped open the hatch that led into the cockpit, the creature came into the hangar. Trent began to shout at it and fire upon it.

Blake hauled himself up, took a quick look around to make sure he was really alone in there, then dropped into the pilot's seat. Immediately, he began to run through the warmup procedures, his fingers flying. He watched Trent hurl a grenade towards the beast and send it staggering. But it righted itself and kept coming towards him.

"What is this thing?" Blake moaned. While the computer ran through its excruciatingly long warmup sequence. He'd never encountered anything remotely similar to this beast in all his runs, nor had he even heard of something like this. The computer beeped at him. He grinned darkly as he wrapped his hands around the fire control and locked onto the huge monstrosity.

"Time to die," he growled. "Trent, get out of there!" He called into the radio. He spied Trent turning and sprinting away, then Blake hit the firing control. A pair of missiles shrieked from their dark nests and slammed directly into the broad chest of the Flood beast. It was consumed in a brilliant display of smoke and fire, and Blake let out a startled, partially happy, partially disgusted sound when a great deal of blood and gore splashed across the windows of the Pelican, cracking them. As the dust and smoke settled and the hangar became quiet once more, Blake stood up and then slowly began to exit the cockpit.

"Not bad, Blake," Trent said, coming out from his hiding place, surveying the carnage. There were pieces of the monster and blood sprayed all over the hangar. They appeared to be alone.

"Thanks," Blake muttered in reply, feeling more exhausted than he had in a long, long time. He found a nearby crate, wandered over to it and sat down slowly. His joints popped and he groaned as he settled into place. Trent came over and joined him. With their backs to the large crate, they stared over the silent hangar.

"You know..." Trent said as he pulled off his helmet. "Today's my birthday." Blake looked over at him, speechless for a moment, then he began to laugh.

"My God you're unlucky," he said finally. Trent chuckled and fished out a battered pack of Yeheyuans. He pulled out two, lit them up and

then offered one to Blake. He removed his helmet, then accepted the cig and stuck it in his mouth.

"The ship should be here in about another forty minutes," he said quietly, then he blew a cloud of smoke.

"Good," Trent murmured. The two men sat there for a few moments longer, smoking in silence, enjoying the fact that they had made it out alive. Trent shifted.

"You know, Blake...I work for a very special branch of ONI," he said. Blake glanced over at him curiously.

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah...and I just might have a job for you."

End  
file.